

Annie Laurie *and* Azalea



ELIA W. PEATTIE

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ANNIE LAURIE AND AZALEA



Azalea and Carin and Annie Laurie.

ANNIE LAURIE AND AZALEA

BY
ELIA W. PEATTIE

*Illustrations by
Joseph Pierre Nuytens*



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Annie Laurie and Azalea

*Annie Laurie and Azalea
beg to be presented to
Loraine, Catherine, Elizabeth and Bernice*

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ANNIE LAURIE AND AZALEA

CHAPTER I

TWO AND ONE MAKE—HOW MANY?

The long red clay road, winding down from the cabin where the McBirneys lived on their high shelf of Tennyson mountain, was frosted delicately with white, and by the roadside the curious frost flowers lifted their heads, as airy-fine as fern. From the half-hidden cabins all around the semicircle of mountains that skirted the valley of Lee, shafts of smoke arose, showing that the people were about the business of the day. Straight, gray and shadowy these smoke-shafts lifted through the lilac-tinted air; and below in the little town, other shafts of smoke ascended as if in friendly answer.

Azalea McBirney, in her dark riding skirt and bright knitted cap and reefer, came running from the cabin with the manner of a girl very much behindhand.

"Ain't he there yet, Zalie?" a voice called from the cabin. "Ain't Jim brought them ponies around yet?"

"No, mother," Azalea answered over her shoulder, starting toward the stable. "Maybe the ponies have been naughty again. I'll go see."

"You just stay where you be," commanded James Stuart McBirney from the stable. "You've got all your work done, ben't you? Well, that's all you have to think about. This here is my job and I mean to do it *whatever* comes, though these here ponies certainly do act up on a morning like this."

"Well, I *would* just as soon get my breath for a moment," Azalea remarked to nobody in particular, seating herself on the bench by the side of the door. "As Hi Kitchell's mother says, 'I bin goin' like a streak o' lightnin' since sun-up.'"

Her cheeks were, indeed, a trifle over-flushed, and forgetting for a moment how time was hastening along, and that she and Jim ought already to be on the road to school, she leaned her head against the side of the cabin and looked about her contentedly. She loved the scene before her;

loved the pines with their light coating of hoarfrost; loved the waterfall with its gleaming icicles; loved the scent of the wood-smoke and the sight of "Molly Cottontail" scampering through the bushes.

Moreover, the kiss of Mary McBirney lay warm on her lips—Mary McBirney who had taken her in when she was a motherless and friendless girl, and whom she found it sweet to call mother. "Mother" was a longer word than Jim—otherwise James Stuart McBirney, the true son of the house—found it convenient to use when he spoke of the woman who was the background of his world. "Ma" was the term he chose, and Mary McBirney would not have cared to have him try any other.

For Jim was just Jim—her own freckled, shy, plucky fellow. He went down to the district school, riding on the pony the Carsons had given him, while beside him, quite as if she were his own sister, rode Azalea, who trusted him to see her through any danger of the road, who laughed as much as anybody could wish at his "hill billy" jokes, and who never, never forgot how he had welcomed her into his home, to share all he had,

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though there never had, at any time, been very much to share.

Yet, though she had been only the "child wonder" of a wandering "show" when she came to the McBirney's—her own poor little mother lying dead in one of the wagons—it was she, and not Jim, the carefully reared boy, who had the grand little ways. Jim was a country boy, with a country boy's straightforward, simple manners. But about Azalea there was something—well, something different. So different was she from the McBirneys that she seemed like a cardinal bird which had been storm-driven into one of the martin gourds that hung in the high cross-trees before the McBirney's door.

All that was easily understood by the few who knew her story. Her grandfather had been Colonel Atherton, the richest, the proudest, and the most elegant gentleman in all the countryside. He had owned great plantations in the old slave days, and had built the beautiful manor house which their new, wonderfully kind neighbors, the Carsons, recently had bought. Azalea's mother had exiled herself by a marriage with a man of whom no parent could approve, and as misfortune drove her ever lower and lower, she

came at length to be a performer in the miserable roadside show with which she had come, in her last hour, to the scene of her father's old home. That home had long since passed into other hands, and concerning it Azalea's mother had told her daughter nothing. It had been by an accident that she later learned the truth.

When Mr. and Mrs. Carson, the friends who had from the first of their acquaintance with her endeavored to add to her happiness, learned her story, they asked her to come into their home to be a sister to their own girl, Carin. And Azalea in her secret heart had longed to go—more than she ever would have told, she longed to be with these accomplished and gracious friends, whose wealth made it possible for them to do almost anything they pleased, and who seemed pleased to do only interesting things. But when she remembered the welcome that had been given her by Mary McBirney, and indeed, by all of the McBirney family, and how she had, in a way, taken the place of their little dead Molly, she was able to put temptation from her; and the hour in which she had made her choice and been gathered in "Ma" McBirney's arms was the happiest she ever had known.

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So, though she was born Azalea Knox, the granddaughter of Colonel Atherton, she was now known as Azalea McBirney, the waif the McBirneys had taken into their cabin to grow up side by side with their son James Stuart. And all over the Valley of Lee an interest was felt in her; partly because of her being an orphan, and a child of quaint and lovable ways, and partly because of a strange happening. Not long after she had come to live with the good mountain folk, the owner of the show with which she had once traveled had kidnapped her, and the search for her had been long and anxious.

When she was rescued and brought back to the home where she was so welcomed and loved, all of the neighbors had a protective feeling for her, and rejoiced that the Carsons, who had come down from the North, and who seemed so eager to be of help to everybody, should have taken her in to be taught with their daughter. Never had there been such neighbors as the Carsons in Lee. They made goodness their business, it seemed. Through them the mountain folk were finding a market for their homemade wares—their woven cloth and their counterpanes, their baskets and chairs, and comfort had come into many

a home where hitherto there had been cruel poverty.

But there on the bench by the doorway in the nipping morning air sits Azalea, with her nose and ears growing redder and redder!

"Jim," she called, awakening from her reverie, "we'll be late as sure as anything."

"Coming right along now, sis," answered the boy as he came running from the stable with the two ponies. "Hop into the saddle, Zalie, and we'll just pelt it down the mountain. Here, I'll hold him. There you are. Hi—they're off."

They surely were. Pa McBirney, busy in his little smithy, heard the clatter of hoofs and thrust his head from the door.

"Watch out, you two!" he warned.

"We will," they called in chorus as they dashed on.

"My sakes," said pa, coming in from the shop and wiping his hands on his leathern apron, "I trust to luck ma didn't see 'em going off. Them young uns are getting too much spirit in 'em to suit me; and as for the ponies, I think they ought to be cut down on their feed."

But neither Azalea nor James Stuart was wanting anyone to cut down on anything. As

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the firm-footed ponies took the cut-offs, minding neither curve nor steep, the children shouted with delight.

"Late?" yelled Jim mockingly. "Who said late? We couldn't be late if we tried."

They reached the parting of their ways, and Azalea, who was leading, turned in her saddle to wave to Jim.

"Good-bye, boy," she called.

"So long, sis," he answered, and turned to follow the creek, and then to mount the hill at the top of which stood the district school. But Azalea kept on along the low-winding road till she came to The Shoals, from whose four tall chimneys the smoke mounted into the tinted air. Benjamin, the polite black boy, was at the horse-block to help her dismount and to lead away Paprika, her pony; and Tulula Darthula, the maid, opened the door to welcome her. Azalea spoke a laughing word of greeting and ran on down the corridor to the schoolroom.

It was a small room, semicircular in shape, opening on the wintry garden. The rounding portion of the wall was all of glass, which in summer time gave way to screens, so that it then seemed an actual part of the garden. Now, the

polished panes reflected the flames leaping in the fireplace, and revealed the frost-fringed hemlocks without. Before the fire sat Miss Parkhurst, the quiet, gray-eyed governess, and with her, Carin, the friend whose approval was more to Azalea than anything else in the world save the love of the new "mother."

"Oh, here I am, late!" cried Azalea contritely. "Please forgive me, ma'am."

Helena Parkhurst gave a pardoning smile.

"I really think we're ahead of time this morning—Carin and I. Take off your things, child, and come up to the fire. We've been trying to have it at its best when you came."

But Azalea's fingers, stiffened with holding the bridle reins, made sorry work with her buttons, and Carin flew to her aid.

"You smell like winter, Azalea," she laughed, sniffing; "all cold and clean."

Azalea laughed happily. Whatever this blue-eyed, golden-haired friend of hers did seemed right to her—nay, better than merely right—complete. It warmed Azalea more than the glow of the room to have Carin snatch her cap from her, and pull her reefer off, and tumble

her with affectionate roughness into the chair before the blaze.

"Colonial history again this morning," said Miss Parkhurst after a time. "We're to read about the Delaware and the Virginia Colonies, since Carin's ancestors came from the first and Azalea's from the second."

"Well, they'll be different enough, won't they?" remarked Carin. "They were different sort of folk before they crossed the Atlantic, and their differences grew after they settled here. And yet here Azalea and I are, as alike as can be."

"But I don't think the differences of the colonists grew, Carin," said Azalea, "and I'm terribly afraid you and I aren't alike. I couldn't be like you if I tried for ever and ever." She gave a wistful sigh, and Miss Parkhurst, watching her without seeming to do so, saw the light of hero-worship in her eyes. She knew that Azalea was one of those who are born to love hungrily, and to live eagerly; and she was thankful that, having so hungry a heart, she was able, when it came to a matter of opinion, to form her own ideas, and to hold to them. Azalea's heart was in leading strings to Carin, but her excellent

little brain went on its independent way, though Carin had traveled and studied, and been all her life with charming and cultivated people, and Azalea had been tended no more than a patch of wayside daisies.

Miss Parkhurst brought the books they were needing from the library, and Carin taking hers, sighed happily: "Isn't it beautiful to be here by ourselves—just the three of us? No one else would fall into our way of doing. How nice it is of you, Miss Parkhurst, to let us follow up whatever idea we're interested in, and to help us learn all we can about that subject, instead of making us dash from one thing to another, till we haven't a notion what we *are* trying to learn. I'd never get anywhere, studying in the old-fashioned way, jumping from subject to subject, and having to wait for a whole class of stupid creatures to come tagging along."

"But you might be the stupid one, you know, Carin," smiled Miss Parkhurst. "I'm afraid it doesn't do to go around the world supposing yourself to be the cleverest one."

Carin shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"I don't think that," she said. "I always think Azalea the cleverest one. I'm only saying that

we three understand each other, and that we don't have to spend half our time explaining, and that we're just as contented together as mortals can be."

And just then the door opened and Mrs. Carson came into the room. Her face had lost something of the look of transparency it had worn when she first came to Lee, when she had been fresh from a terrible sorrow, but it was still pale and strangely tender to Azalea's admiring eyes.

"I do hope you'll excuse me, Miss Parkhurst," she said in her soft voice, "for breaking into the study hour. But I've something important to talk over, and so I've come while all the members of the academy are together."

She shook hands with Azalea as she spoke, and patted Carin caressingly on the shoulder.

"I've come," she went on, "to talk to you about taking in another girl."

"Another girl!" cried Carin in dismay. "What girl, please, mamma?" She had sprung to her feet, and stood before her mother with the color sweeping over her face; but Azalea, keeping her thoughts to herself, grew paler, and pinched the edge of the table in her effort to keep the tears

of vexation and disappointment from coming to her eyes.

Another girl! And this perfect possession of Carin would be taken from her, and there'd be, as Carin put it, need to "explain" all of the time. How *could* Mrs. Carson spoil such a perfect thing as their association there? Who else would love to study, and to write, and paint and sing the way they did? Who else would make a game out of it all, and long to get to the school-room in the morning and hate to leave at night?

"It's Annie Laurie Pace," went on Mrs. Carson, apparently taking no heed of their misery. "Have you met her? Perhaps not, since she goes to the Baptist Meeting House, and you, Azalea, are such a faithful young Methodist, and Carin goes with me to the Episcopal Church. But anyway, I think you must have seen her—a tall girl, with red hair. She's been helping me some at The Mountain Industries rooms, and I've become well acquainted with her. She's ahead of anything she can get at the district school. Of course I don't mean that she couldn't do more mathematics and that sort of thing, but I am convinced that she has a strength and originality of thought which is very un-

usual. She came here this morning to borrow some books I had offered to lend her, and I have been talking with her for the last hour. I am so convinced that the work here under Miss Parkhurst and with you two shining little stars will give her precisely what she is hungering for, that I have invited her to join you."

"But, mamma," expostulated Carin, "we'll be *wretched* with her! She's a nice enough girl, I'm sure, and no doubt she's bright, but she'll never be able to really understand Azalea and me, will she, Azalea?"

Azalea said nothing. She was dreadfully embarrassed. She was wondering if Mrs. Carson had some secret reason for forcing another girl in with them? Could it possibly be that she—Azalea—who had been a wandering child, traveling with coarse people in a low circus, was, without knowing it, doing harm to Carin? Perhaps. Carin was so fine, so gay, so sweet, so "like a flower" as the song had it which Mrs. Carson sang, that very likely she seemed no more than a weed beside her.

"Probably that is all I am—a horrid, stupid weed," said Azalea to herself bitterly as her

thoughts flashed this way and that like troubled birds, seeking for what was wrong.

"You can see how Azalea hates the idea, mamma," said Carin. "And as for me, if that girl comes in here, my education will be ruined."

She looked a haughty and determined young person as she stood there, her chin lifted and her blue eyes darting cold fires. Mrs. Carson had a twinkle in her eye as she surveyed her. Carin had been a gentle princess in the schoolroom, with Miss Parkhurst for her willing guide and Azalea her adoring servitor. The truth was, the two girls had become so bound up in each other that they saw nothing beyond their own horizon. The dark-eyed girl from the mountain cabin, with her strange, romantic history, and the blue-eyed one from the mansion, loving romance above all imaginable things, had made a compact of undying friendship; and unconsciously, they had also determined to exclude the rest of the world.

"It may seem a little hard for you and Azalea to take Annie Laurie in just at first, Carin," Mrs. Carson went on, with no show of yielding—indeed, quite as if everything were settled—"but she desperately needs the schooling, and I be-

lieve that, without realizing it, you need her. What do you think, Miss Parkhurst; am I right?"

To the increasing dismay of the friends, Helena Parkhurst nodded her nice little head.

"One of the chief reasons why a girl should go to school," went on Mrs. Carson, smilingly, "is to learn to get along with other girls. You and Azalea are so wrapped up in each other that you actually don't see other girls as they pass you on the road, and it never seems to occur to you to visit their homes, or to ask them here. It has been borne in upon me for some time that if I don't watch out, you'll become a pair of horrid little snobs. Of course you wouldn't know that you were, and equally of course I wouldn't admit it to anybody else. But such would be the case, I feel sure."

"Oh, mother, we wouldn't, we wouldn't!" protested Carin. "Just try us a little longer and see."

But at that moment there came a knock at the door, and Mrs. Carson arose to open it. The girls could see without in the hallway the figure of Annie Laurie Pace, the red-haired, surprisingly tall girl whom they had occasionally seen

in town; and now it occurred to each of them that they had not particularly wished to know her.

"Did you say I was to come down here, Mrs. Carson, after I had found that book?" she asked shyly.

"Why, no," said Mrs. Carson impulsively, "I didn't say that, Annie Laurie, but now that you *are* here, come in and meet my daughter and her friend."

She entered with a quiet dignity, and it took but one second for Carin and Azalea to see that here would be no timid imitator of their whims. If "follow-my-leader" was played, it was not at all certain that they would be in the fore.

"Carin," said Mrs. Carson, recovering herself from a moment's embarrassment, "make your new schoolmate welcome. Annie Laurie Pace, Azalea McBirney."

Carin held out a chilly white hand.

"How do you do?" she said stiffly.

Azalea arose and gave her hand to the new girl. She had been a stranger herself—had many a time been among men and women unknown to her, waiting wistfully to see if she would be welcomed—and she understood, as Carin could

not possibly, what brought the veiled look in the new girl's eyes. Yet she could not venture to offend Carin—her own Carin, whose ways always seemed charming to her.

"How do you do?" she echoed. "I—I hope you are well, Annie Laurie. This—this is a very—pleasant school."

The words stuck in her throat, and she was ashamed to find how much she wanted to cry.

The new girl looked toward Mrs. Carson.

"Ought I to stay, ma'am?" she asked. "You know I could manage at the other school some way. Wouldn't it be better if—"

"You will do us a favor if you stay with us," Mrs. Carson said. And: "Yes, stay, my dear," urged Helena Parkhurst, making the girls realize for the first time that Annie Laurie had not been presented to Miss Parkhurst, and that the two must have been acquainted before. How long, the girls wondered, had this conspiracy been in the air? Had it really been decided only that morning?

"Will you take up your studies to-day, then, Annie Laurie?" Miss Parkhurst asked. "Mrs. Carson, do you think her father would object?"

"I can telephone him," Mrs. Carson replied.

"We already have had some conversation about the matter. He has been thinking of sending Annie Laurie away to school, but to do such a thing, he said, would leave him very, very lonely, since Annie Laurie is his only child."

"Oh, it could be managed," the girl broke in. "I know it could, but—"

Mrs. Carson raised a white hand.

"It will be quite all right," she said with gentle firmness. "Miss Parkhurst, you have three pupils."

She withdrew smilingly; and in spite of the leaping flame in the fireplace, and the sunshine stealing like pale gold in at the window, a chill settled down over the room. It crept into the farthest corners, and gleamed cold as little bergs from the eyes of the three girls.

The three girls?

There were two girls—and one girl. And the sum was not yet three.

CHAPTER II

ANNIE LAURIE PACE

Annie Laurie Pace was making ready for church.

Her Sunday frock of dark blue serge lay on the bed; her silk petticoat rustled as she stepped briskly about the room; and her heavy coat and gloves, and her hat with the ostrich plumes, were primly awaiting her need. All was durable about her clothing, and orderly within the room.

A very clean room it was, somewhat bare and bleak, with a ceiling too high for its size. The floor was uncarpeted, the walls white and without pictures. No unnecessary thing was in sight—not even a pretty foolish trinket on the dresser. Through the windows with their dark green shades Annie Laurie could look out into the dairy yard with its whitewashed houses. Beyond stretched the pastures in which grazed the fine herd that was the pride of her father, Simeon Pace.

Usually, Annie Laurie sang as she dressed for

church. She had a warm full voice, with notes in it not unlike the whistle of an oriole. But this morning no song came from her lips. She had a set, almost stern look; her chin came out a little farther than was necessary, and there was battle in her eye.

Her aunts, dressing in the next room, spoke of it.

"Annie Laurie is *not* herself," declared Miss Adnah to Miss Zillah. "I can see that she is terribly put about. I do hope and pray that we haven't made a mistake in letting her leave the district school and go in with Carin Carson and that other girl. It looks to me as if Mrs. Carson was the only person that wanted her—except, perhaps, the governess, Miss Parkhurst—and staying where we're not wanted is not a thing that we could ever put up with, we Paces."

"Don't worry about Annie Laurie, sister," replied Miss Zillah, setting her queer lid-like hat on her short gray curls. "She made the change of her own free will, remember. She's run up against a stone wall for the first time in her life, and I'll be interested to see whether she climbs over or burrows under it. Those two girls she's studying with don't like her—or at

least they don't like to have her intruding on them. I don't know as I blame them very much. There they were, enjoying each other's society, and in comes a stranger and thrusts them apart, you may say. Annie Laurie is as unlike them as she can be—quite of a different class, indeed."

Miss Adnah snapped the fasteners of her gloves sharply.

"What do you mean by a different class, sister?" she said reprovingly. "Is it possible you consider the Paces inferior to anyone in this community?"

"Now, Adnah dear, I didn't say anything about inferiority. I spoke of a difference. What the Paces know, they've mostly taught themselves; and what they have, they've honestly earned. They're proud of it. But they're no prouder of being what they are—well-to-do, reliable, respectable members of the community—than the Carsons are of being highly cultivated, rich, much-traveled gentle-folk, or the McBirneys of being industrious, independent mountain people. The truth is, Adnah, if there were fewer kinds of pride in this community, and less of each kind, it would be a better thing."

"The team is up, aunts," called Annie Laurie in her clear voice.

"Very well, child; we are ready," came the reply.

Of course they were ready. It was seldom, indeed, that anyone in that house kept anyone else waiting. Simeon Pace, holding his fine large grays in check, knew almost to a second how long before the front door would open and three tall, upright figures emerge. And this morning was no exception. At the right instant his sisters, in their well-preserved cloaks, came out together, followed by his daughter. The door was locked, the key placed in the crotch of the sycamore, the aunts were helped to their places by Annie Laurie's strong arms and then she swung herself into the seat beside her father, and took the reins from his hands. As she did so, she happened to hit her father's left arm, which gave forth a sound like the rattling of an eave trough in the wind.

And truth to tell, it was made of the same material, for where Simeon Pace's muscular member of flesh and blood had once swung, there now was an unjointed tin substitute for it, hollow as a drum. An ill-advised visit to a sawmill five

years before was responsible for this defect, which indeed, might have been all but concealed had Mr. Pace been willing to buy one of the excellent modern imitations of an arm. His sisters and his daughter continually urged him to do this, but Simeon said that his tin arm had helped him when his trouble was new, and that he refused to throw it on the trash heap as a reward for faithful service. It was nothing to him that his gestures startled nervous folk. He remained loyal to his battered, awkward tin convenience, and seemed to take an innocent joy in waving it in the air, offering it as a support to old ladies, and sawing it up and down when he became excited. All the Paces were independent and Simeon was the most independent of them all.

He led his women folk well up to the front of the church and eyed them with critical kindness as they filed past him into the pew, confident that their thoughts would not wander from the preacher's words during the service. So it was good for his fatherly satisfaction that he did not look into his daughter's mind, for barely a sentence of the sermon did she hear that day. Her thoughts were slipping back and forth like shut-

tles in a loom. The past week in Mrs. Carson's home has been a strange—and in some ways, a distressing—one. True, never had she learned so much in so short a space of time. If she asked a question everyone tried to answer it. Little as the other two girls had seemed to like her, when it came to a question of ideas, they paid instant and warm attention. An idea was an idea with them, and entitled to respect.

If the combined wit of Miss Parkhurst and her pupils failed to supply a good answer to an inquiry, plenty of books were at hand to consult, and as a last reference, there were Mr. and Mrs. Carson, who seemed to have been almost everywhere and to know something about almost everything. As Annie Laurie had heard them talk, speaking with interest about all manners of people, her little local standards began to vanish like mist before the sun. For the first time it was borne in upon her that Lee, North Carolina, was not the center of civilization. All the world, it appeared, was full of interest—full of good neighborly folk. All one had to do was to learn their language to find out how very nice they really were. It was such a new and bril-

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liant idea to Annie Laurie that it almost dazzled her.

She had been used to thinking herself a bright girl—a girl who could keep at the head of her classes—so it was but natural in those first angry hours when she raged at the cold reception Carin and Azalea had given her, that she should have thought: “Just wait till we get down to lessons, and then I’ll show them.”

But to her surprise, she had not been able to “show them.” Carin and Azalea did not attack their studies so fiercely as she did. They seemed to make more of a game of them and less of a task. They laughed over things that puzzled her. But for all that they were clever, and it did not seem strange to them that Annie Laurie should be clever too. Her cleverness, as they knew, was Mrs. Carson’s excuse for asking her to join them. After that first chilly day they had been polite enough. But they somehow put her in the wrong. She felt awkward and strange. She fatally said the wrong thing—or the right thing in the wrong place. Even her clothes had seemed stiff and unlovely beside theirs, though they were of good material and honestly and thoroughly made. However, as Annie Laurie had more

than once reflected, their clothes were made for them by their mothers, who asked nothing better than to see them looking their best. That Mary McBirney was not really Azalea's mother made no difference—she loved Azalea almost as much, judging from what Azalea said.

Annie Laurie stole a glance at her two excellent aunts—always so really kind and just to her—but rather stern, like her father. The Paces seldom laughed; they almost never kissed each other; they said what they thought—and they quite lacked that pretty foolishness which Mrs. Carson sometimes indulged in with Carin.

Annie Laurie could remember that her own mother had been something like Mrs. Carson. It was she who had given her the name after the sweet old song. *She* had laughed and danced and sung, and the aunts had not quite liked it, although they mourned her deeply when she died, still in her youth. And they had treasured as keepsakes the things which had been hers.

But what was the preacher saying all this time? Something about Ananias and the doom which overtook him because of his lies. It was not a subject in which she could feel much interest. Sometimes, up at her house they suffered

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from too much truth telling—hard, cold truth telling—but not a soul of them would have been guilty of a lie.

“Plant a lie in the garden of your soul,” said the minister, “and it will flourish worse than any poisonous weed. And do not think that you can uproot it when you will, for it will grow and grow, till it is stronger than you, and not all your prayers and tears can tear it out of your life.”

Annie Laurie wondered why he should be talking like that to those friendly, good neighbors, who seemed to be doing the best they could from morning till night. She wished he would talk about something that would help her through the coming week, for she dreaded going back with those girls who did not like her. Why couldn't preachers know what was going on in the back of one's mind? She looked up wearily and met the gaze of “that Disbrow boy,” as her aunts always called Sam Disbrow, the son of the undertaker. For some reason they did not like him. They “had no use for the whole kit and b'ilin' of Disbrows.” Yet, someway, Annie Laurie, though she had grown up with this sentiment ringing in her ears, thought Sam Disbrow rather a nice boy. At this moment he seemed to

be as impatient as she was at the way the minister was scolding about liars. Evidently liars failed to interest Sam, also.

It happened that Annie Laurie and Sam were near together as the people came out of church, and while the rest stood talking in the bright winter sunshine, they talked, too.

"How are you liking it at your new school, Annie Laurie?" he inquired.

The girl flushed hotly—it was easy for a person with such white skin as Annie Laurie's to blush. Sam knew this and made allowances, but he saw there was something more than ordinary the matter. He looked at her a moment, half closing his eyes, and turning his head a little on one side in a way he had.

"They've been snubbing you—those girls!" he declared. "I knew they would—knew it as well as anything."

"I don't see how you could know that," said Annie Laurie with a sudden feeling that she ought not say anything against Carin and Aza-lea. "They're the nicest girls I ever knew; the nicest girls anywhere about here. If I haven't been able to—to make them understand me, it's my own fault, I suppose."

"Nonsense!" cried Sam. "They're not nice if they've been making you unhappy. How can you let them do it? No fellow could put it over me, now, I tell you. If he didn't treat me fair and square, I'd have it out with him. We'd soon see who was the best man."

"Girls don't do things that way, Sam."

"I know they don't. They sit around and mope and sniff and feel mean, instead of making a good healthy row. I didn't think you were such a hypocrite."

"Hypocrite?" gasped the girl, too surprised to feel angry. "How am I a hypocrite, Sam?"

"Because you're pretending to be contented when you aren't. You probably act as if you liked those girls. And you don't—you can't—if they're snubby. I say, stir up a fuss. Have a row. Tell 'em what you think of 'em. That will clear the air."

"I'm under too many obligations to Mrs. Carson to do a thing like that, Sam."

"Obligations!" snorted Sam. "Nobody is under obligations to be a doormat."

All the way home the girl kept thinking of what Sam Disbrow had said to her. She would have liked to talk the whole matter over with

her Aunt Zillah, but something held her back from complaining of the girls. Deep down within her was the feeling that if only she could manage right, they would yet be friends, true, "forever and forever" friends. If that should prove to be so, it wouldn't do for this one and that one to be remembering that she had criticised them.

And yet, how they had tormented her with their way of seeing and yet not seeing her, and answering and yet not answering. And she was lonely—desperately lonely. She longed to see the gleam come in the girls' eyes when they looked at her, which they turned upon each other. All the long, quiet Sunday afternoon she thought of it, though she tried to read. She knew Azalea and Carin were together, for she had heard them planning a horseback ride, while she was alone, and as she told herself sadly, likely to be alone every Sunday, since she knew no one she really wished to be with—save those two, of course.

She had an hour of trying to hate them, but she failed miserably. For all they had made her suffer, she could not get as far as hating them. She failed to sleep well that night. Her mind

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whirled like a merry-go-round, always bringing back the same thoughts and persons. Azalea and Carin, Carin and Azalea. The bright and charming faces kept returning, but never once did they seem to bear the smiles of friendship and understanding.

Naturally she was far from being herself when she went down to breakfast the next morning, and when her Aunt Adnah said, "You see to it, Ann, that you're not put upon there at Mrs. Carson's," her patience snapped like a wind-filled bag.

"Oh, please leave me alone, Aunt Adnah," she cried hotly. "I'll take care of myself all right."

"My dear, my dear," murmured Miss Zillah, "ought you to be speaking like that to your Aunt Adnah?"

Annie Laurie knew very well that she ought not, and she was morally certain that if Carin and Azalea could have heard her, they would have cried: "There, see! You call *her* a nice girl?"

Well, maybe she wasn't a nice girl, but certainly she was an unhappy one.

She put her head up as high as she could com-

fortably carry it on her very slim neck and marched away to school. It was a wonderful winter morning—the sort that got into the blood of horses and made them prance. Perhaps it was in Annie Laurie's blood, too, as she entered the schoolroom that morning. Miss Parkhurst had not yet come, and Carin and Azalea sat together laughing over some charts of the South Sea Isles. Miss Parkhurst had laid out an interesting course for them, all relating to the Archipelago; and geography, history, biography, poetry and fiction were to be woven together until the life of the "burning isles" appeared before them in a series of vivid mental pictures.

If Annie Laurie had been aware of the amount of explosive material in her brain and heart that morning, perhaps she would have had the discretion to remain at home. She really was about as dangerous as a keg of gunpowder, and it chanced that Carin's first words were as a match to produce the inevitable explosion.

"I don't suppose you'd care about reading Stevenson's 'Ebb Tide,' would you, Annie Laurie? Not, I mean, as a part of the South Sea study?" She put the question in that cold,

detached little voice which she had used from the first to the "new girl." "We couldn't expect a thorough person like yourself to enjoy such an unbusiness-like way of getting at things. I said to Miss Parkhurst that probably Azalea and I had better keep that for reading after hours, and during school we'll study any old Smithsonian Institute reports you and she manage to look up."

There was a little click in Annie Laurie's throat, but no spoken word. Carin, looked up, saw the anger blazing in the girl's eyes, and started to say that she was only joking; but before she could frame the words Annie Laurie found her tongue.

"Why wouldn't I like to read Stevenson as well as you two?" she demanded. "Why do you make out that I try to do things in the hard and stupid way? You've certainly made them hard and stupid enough for me the past week. You're supposed to have such fine manners, and Azalea is thought 'so sweet.' I haven't seen your fine manner or her sweetness. I imagined it was going to be lovely here with you two—that my life would grow to be interesting when we three were friends. Well, perhaps it would—if we could

be friends. But we can't. First, because you won't be—and second because I won't. I'm through. I shouldn't have come. I'm disgusted that I gave you a chance to snub me. I'm going now, and after this when you poke fun at me you'll have to do it behind my back."

"Why—why—Annie Laurie—" gasped Carin, "I didn't know—"

But Annie Laurie already had left the room and was stalking down the corridor. Carin sank back in her chair and covered her face with her hands. As for Azalea, her book crashed to the floor.

"Oh, Carin," she cried, "what have we done?"

Miss Parkhurst still was absent, but if she had been there, it is doubtful if the girls would have consulted her. The battle which had been threatening all week was on, and the victory at present was, oddly enough, with the fleeing enemy.

She was already out of the front door by the time Azalea had reached the hall; and once she was in the open, her dignity deserted her and she ran toward the gate as if fleeing from a lava stream. Azalea, who had stopped to snatch her cap and reefer, reached the gate only to see her

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racing along the road as fast as her long legs would carry her.

Meantime, Hi Kitchell, the boy who had traveled with Azalea in those old, half-forgotten days, and who was now happily settled with his mother and "the kids" in the cabin in which the Carsons had placed them, opened his sharp eyes to see two girls racing along the frozen road, stumbling over hard ruts, and then plunging on again. He knew them both—liked Annie Laurie and swore by Azalea. He saw the anger in the first girl's face and the anxiety in Azalea's every gesture. He couldn't for the life of him see why, if Annie Laurie felt like that, she didn't turn around and "baste" Azalea. But if she did he'd be on Azalea's side all right enough.

Goodness, how they were running! He simply couldn't stand not knowing what it all was about. He knew it was none of his business, but for all of that, a second later he was pelting down the road after them. He could run like a rabbit and it was not long before he overtook them.

But that was just at the moment when Annie Laurie reached her home and, dashing in, slammed the door behind her; and Azalea, panting on the doorstep, furiously rang the bell.

CHAPTER III

TRIAL WITHOUT JURY

Miss Adnah was washing dishes in her spotless kitchen when the inner door burst open and a wild-eyed Annie Laurie stood before her.

"Child!" gasped Miss Adnah.

Annie Laurie stood panting breathlessly, her hands on her sides, her eyes blazing.

"Well, you said I wasn't to let myself be put upon," she managed to say at length. "So I didn't. I had my say. I'm through!"

"What have you done?"

"I'm through," she went on shrilly. "To-morrow I'll go back to the district school. The other thing wasn't for me."

The anger in her eyes began to give way in misery. Miss Adnah stared at her, trying for once to get at the girl's point of view. Then came the frantic ringing at the bell.

"Mercy on us," cried Miss Adnah, "what can that mean?"

"Don't go, aunt. Don't you go. It's Azalea McBirney. She followed me. You mustn't—"

"Stand out of my way, Ann. How can you put yourself between me and the door? When the bell rings, it is to be answered. I do not approve of your actions, allow me to say."

But just then the breathless voice of Azalea was heard in the hall. Miss Zillah had got to the door before them, and had admitted her.

"Don't try to talk, my dear," they heard Miss Zillah saying. "Whatever it is, it can wait till you get your breath. Come in, please, and sit down."

In the kitchen, Annie Laurie was declaring that whatever came she would not go into the parlor.

"I won't talk the matter over, that's all," she said. "It's no use for you to try to make me go in there."

Miss Adnah moved back from her niece with a look of displeasure.

"You'd better quiet down, Ann," she said severely. "I can't imagine what you've done or what's been done to you, but I do feel certain that you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill."

At that moment something bobbed up at the window and then bobbed down again.

"Mercy, what's that?" cried Miss Adnah.

"A head," said Annie Laurie disgustedly.

"A head! Whose?"

"Hi Kitchell's. He must have seen us running and followed."

"The inquisitive little imp! A pretty sight the three of you must have made. Never have I heard such goings on in the house of Simeon Pace. Let me pass, Ann. I must look into this matter."

Annie Laurie never yet had disobeyed when her aunt spoke in that manner, and she stood aside, lifting her eyebrows with annoyance at the "Ann" which was the sign of Miss Adnah's displeasure. She began to grow a little calmer, but at the same time the feeling of heaviness at her heart increased. It actually seemed as if it had turned into a stone and was dragging her down. And worse still, there was a hand of iron at her throat. That sharp despair of the young was upon her—that foolish despair, which sees no way out of hard circumstance.

Meantime Miss Adnah had gone on into the hall. She had meant to make her way at once into that grim parlor upon which her best efforts at cleanliness were so rigorously expended, but

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the sound of voices made her pause. She heard a girl's excited voice broken by tears.

"Oh, you're Annie Laurie's aunt, aren't you?" said the voice. "Which aunt, please? Her aunt Zillah? Oh, yes. She has told me about you. Oh, Miss Pace, it's so dreadful! We've broken Annie Laurie's heart, that's what we've done. We didn't intend it, you know. It came about because—may I tell you everything?"

"Yes, tell me everything," answered Miss Zillah.

"Of course Zillah will be soft with her," thought Miss Adnah. "She's soft with everybody. I'd like to go in and shake her—upsetting Annie Laurie like that."

There were long panes of glass running down beside the front hall door, and at this moment the ferret face of Hi Kitchell, seamed with anxiety, peered in one of them. This was really too much for Miss Adnah. She rushed to the door and threw it open, sending Hi off backward into the althea bush. It was no trick at all for Miss Adnah to stoop and pick him up as if he were a slug.

"What do you mean, you unmannerly, prying

boy?" she demanded. "Peeking in folk's windows, like you were a wild Indian!"

"Tell me what you're doing to Azalea," squealed Hi defiantly. "Azalea's all right, ma'am. I don't want anything done to her."

"Well, she wasn't invited here any more than you," snapped Miss Adnah, dropping him on the brick walk. "You run home and leave us to conduct our own affairs. Hear?"

"Oh, aunt!" Annie Laurie whispered agonizingly, "Azalea will hear you."

"Why didn't you stay in the kitchen, miss? You seemed very anxious not to leave it a few minutes ago. I won't have boys looking in my windows."

"But it's only Hi. He's crazy about Azalea—like her little brother, you know. Azalea will think we're dreadful."

"Dreadful? We may be a terror to evil doers—well, hear that telephone, will you? Ringing like mad. Never did I know such a morning. No, I'll answer it, Ann. Hello! Hello! Yes. The Pace residence. Who? Carin Carson. Very well, what is it? Yes, Ann is home. All right? Of course she's all right. Why shouldn't she be? You want to speak to her? She's busy just now."

"Oh, oh, don't speak like that, aunt," implored Annie Laurie. "Not in that tone of voice. Let me have the telephone, Aunt Adnah, please—please. I was bad, honestly, aunt—not at all the way I ought to have been. Carin's sorry, I reckon."

But Miss Adnah had hung up the receiver, and she turned toward Annie Laurie with a stormy look in her eye.

"I reckon I did you an injustice, Ann. It must have been something pretty bad they did to you. You can back down as much as you please, but for my part I mean to teach them that if they think they can fool with the Paces, they are making a mistake."

"But my child," the clear tones of Miss Zillah could be heard saying from the drawing room meantime, "why didn't you like Annie Laurie? She seems the nicest sort of a girl to me. I've taken care of her—I and my sister, that is—since she was a little one, and she's all that a daughter should be to us. Of course I realize that we may not have succeeded in taking her mother's place to her. That was hardly to have been expected. But we have done the best we could for her, and when we saw her coming on

in school so splendidly, and realized that she was likely to do something fine, we were very proud indeed. I can't tell you how grateful we were to Mrs. Carson for giving her a chance for special instruction, and for being in with girls like you and Miss Carin. But we saw from the first that something was going wrong. The child seemed too excited to eat. Once or twice I've heard her cry out in the night—she sleeps next me, and after she's asleep I open the door between our rooms so as to hear if anything goes wrong."

"And a very silly habit it is," muttered Miss Adnah from the hall.

"Oh, don't say any more, Miss Pace," Azalea broke in with a sob in her voice. "If anybody in this world ought to have been good to Annie Laurie it is myself, for I haven't any mother, either, you know, though of course Mrs. Mc-Birney is as good to me as any mother could be. I can't explain the way we've acted. It all came about from Carin and myself having some lovely secrets together, and games we liked to play that we didn't want to share with any one. And we were writing poems, and Carin was painting me. We were happy in each other all the time. Then

Annie Laurie came and—and we didn't know her. It wouldn't have made any difference who the girl was that broke in on us, we wouldn't have liked it. Mrs. Carson said we were getting selfish and snobbish, and I suppose we were. And Annie Laurie was proud, too—and—and well, a little—"

"Say it, my dear. I am not laboring under the delusion that Annie Laurie is wearing a halo on her head."

"Well, sulky. So she didn't give us a chance to see the—the nice side which she simply *must* have since you love her so. And we wouldn't show ours to her. We were all stupid, I think. But of course we didn't have an idea how she really felt until this morning when she got so angry. And then I was—was just paralysed."

"You talk very well, my child, for a person suffering with paralysis. I can see very well how it came about, however. Now may I ask why you came here?"

"To say how sorry we were—and to beg Annie Laurie to come back with us."

"But have you the right to do this? Did Mrs. Carson tell you to come?"

Azalea, who had been sitting on the very edge

of Miss Zillah's horsechair sofa, now got to her feet, her face flaming till it was almost as red as her knitted reefer.

"No," she said frankly. "She—she didn't tell me to come, Miss Pace. I just ran after Annie Laurie as hard as I could."

"And very sweet it was of you, my dear. It shows you have a generous heart, and that you couldn't imagine Mrs. Carson or her daughter would feel any differently from you. But you can see for yourself that I must wait till I hear from them."

"We *have* heard from them," cried Annie Laurie eagerly from the hall. "Carin telephoned, Aunt Zillah; but Aunt Adnah wouldn't let her talk."

"I should think not, indeed," came the voice of Aunt Adnah.

"Oh, come in, Annie Laurie, please," cried Azalea, running toward the hall door.

Annie Laurie made a motion as if for flight, then brought herself up sharply, and faced Azalea. Miss Zillah had arisen and stood smiling and trembling a trifle, too, like a rose bush softly shaken by the wind. Her lips moved slightly, and Annie Laurie, flashing a glance at her as

she came into the room, understood that Aunt Zillah was putting up one of her gentle supplications for peace.

"Oh, Annie Laurie," Azalea burst forth, "I've come to ask you to forgive me. You really, really must. I had no idea how you were feeling. I'm terribly unhappy about it. Don't you think you can forgive me?"

"What is there for me to forgive?" asked Annie Laurie. "You didn't want me—you and Carin—and you showed it. That's all there is to it. I shan't bother you any more."

"Well, I want you now," declared Azalea. "You can see yourself that it would be impossible for Carin and me to be happy with you leaving that way, all hurt and angry. I don't blame you a bit, really. Except, of course, I think you shut up like a clam when you saw that we didn't like a third person in the classes. It wasn't that we objected to you in particular. We were selfish, that's all, and fond of our own good times; but it won't be like that again, honestly it won't. Your aunt says I mustn't speak for Carin and Mrs. Carson, and I see that I mustn't, but I know so well that I am saying just what they would want me to say, that I can't keep still." She

turned toward Miss Zillah, and caught the worn hand of the woman in hers. "Truly," she said, "they'd be saying just what I am, if they were here."

"That boy again!" exploded Miss Adnah from the hall. "He's looking in the hall window again."

"It's only poor Hi," explained Azalea. "You see, he's always afraid something is going to happen to me."

"Well, if I had my way, it would," snapped Miss Adnah.

"Oh, sister, sister," murmured Miss Zillah.

And just then the eyes of Azalea and Annie Laurie met. There was a flash between them and then something exploded—exploded in helpless laughter. Miss Zillah, unable to believe her senses, called faintly, "Adnah! Adnah!" And Adnah, on the point of making another sortie into the yard for the prying Hi, answered her appeal, and came to the parlor. There she saw the two girls in convulsions of laughter, and Zillah stiff and incredulous on the piano stool. Miss Adnah surveyed the scene for a moment in wrath.

"Come, Zillah," she commanded, and dragged her sister from the room.

The girls heard the kitchen door slam behind the two, and rocked again with painful mirth.

"Oh, oh," half-sobbed Annie Laurie at length, "how ridiculous we've been!"

"Dreadful," agreed Azalea. "I'm just as ashamed of myself as I can be. Can't I go and apologize to your aunts?"

"Not on any account," said Annie Laurie firmly. "They'll never understand. Never! You couldn't expect them to."

"Will you come back with me, Annie Laurie? We're bound to like each other now after we've laughed together like that."

Annie Laurie gave a final gurgle.

"I know," she said. "Let's go out and tell Hi."

"No, just let's walk out together, arm in arm. That will make it all right. Let's never, never tell anyone what happened."

"Very well, then. And you think I ought to go back?"

"I know it. You must go on Carin's account and on mine—just prove we're not so horrid as you thought us."

The telephone rang again. They could hear

Miss Zillah begging to be allowed to answer it and Miss Adnah refusing. So Annie Laurie took down the receiver.

"Yes, Mrs. Carson," Azalea heard her say. "Yes, it's Annie Laurie. Yes, Azalea is here. Forgive Carin? Yes, Mrs. Carson. I reckon it was my fault, too. Oh, I'm sure it wasn't *your* fault, whoever it was, ma'am. We've been bad, that's all. Everybody is bad sometimes, I suppose. I never was so horrid before, though, honestly. You say Carin never was, either. Well, I'm coming back now. Azalea and I were just starting. What is it? Oh, yes, we'll not talk of it. Very well, Mrs. Carson. Good-bye."

She turned to Azalea.

"Come," she said, "if we go right along we'll be able to finish our South Sea Island study hour."

She put her head in the kitchen door.

"Good-bye, aunts," she said. "Try to forget about it all. I'm going back."

"Annie Laurie," came the austere voice of her Aunt Adnah, "how can you?"

Annie Laurie ran in and threw her arms around her aunt's neck.

"Because I have to, auntie," she said, "to be happy and—"

"And good," broke in Aunt Zillah. She followed them out into the hall. Her pale face was shining, and her short curls bobbed about on her trembling head. She knew that her prayer for peace had been answered. It did not matter to her that it had come in gusts of laughter. Miss Zillah was not one to quarrel with ways and means.

As for the girls, they set out on the road with vigor. The air was full of life, the mountains were brown beneath their purple bloom, and the roadway was beginning to fill with folk driving in to market. Azalea and Annie Laurie knew almost every one—knew Mr. Disbrow, the undertaker, driving his black horses—which now were hitched to a somewhat rickety buggy—they knew "Haystack" Thompson, who was eating up the road with his great strides, his fiddle under his arm; they knew Elder Mills, twisted and tormented with rheumatism, who was about to "accept a call" in Florida, thus leaving vacant the pulpit of the Methodist church; they were well acquainted with the grocer, and the miller, and the postmaster, and the sheriff. From each

they received a salutation, and from most of them an inquiry as to why they were not in school. Annie Laurie, used to the "yea and nay" of the Pace household, wondered what they ought to answer, and she was astonished that Azalea had no difficulty at all in finding a fit reply.

"Oh, we've been to school this morning," she said smilingly. "And we've learned a hard lesson, too. Now we're on our way back again."

But they had got no more than half the way to The Shoals when the familiar surrey of the Carsons appeared, with Mrs. Carson sitting in it.

"Goodness," cried Annie Laurie, "she's coming for me! What trouble I have put everybody to."

But Mrs. Carson didn't seem to think that anybody was making her trouble. She wore that pleasant, dreamy smile of hers—her "moonlight" smile, as Carin called it, and her voice was as even and low as ever as she bade Benjamin turn the horses, and invited the girls to get in beside her.

"I thought I'd come to meet you," she said blandly, and quite as if nothing had happened. They rode along together in silence for a while,

almost wondering if anything unpleasant really had occurred, Mrs. Carson seemed so unconscious of it. But when they got out of the carriage at the house door she said:

"I'm so glad you've talked everything out. You'll find it much better always, I believe—to talk things out. By the way, Carin is up in her studio. Lessons are to be up there this morning, for a change. Azalea, will you kindly show Annie Laurie the way? Your luncheon will be served there too. We thought we'd celebrate the formation of the Triple Alliance."

"What, ma'am?" said Azalea.

"The Three Girls' Alliance," smiled Mrs. Carson. "Drive back to town, please Ben. I must do my marketing."

As she rode off, Annie Laurie looked at Azalea in a puzzled way.

"How quiet she is," she said. "I can't make her out. Nothing seems to matter to her, yet she's always doing good. I never heard of anyone who did so much good. Can you understand her?"

Azalea shook her head.

"No—and yet a great sorrow, such as hers—it makes you still, I reckon. My mother—I call

Mrs. McBirney my mother, you know—is still. Yet she has lost only one child, and little Molly died right in her arms. But Mrs. Carson lost her three sons in a theatre fire in Chicago, and it did something to her, I suppose. The heart went out of her, though not the goodness.”

“Oh, dear no,” agreed Annie Laurie, “not the goodness.”

They left their outer wraps in the vacant schoolroom, and then made their way up the wide mahogany stairs, with the gleaming white banisters and mahogany rail. Curious old prints lined the side of the wall, and Annie Laurie wanted to pause and look at them, but Azalea urged her on.

“If you stopped to look at every interesting thing in this house,” she said, “you’d never get anywhere.”

They went on past the floor where the bedrooms were, and then up a narrower flight of stairs to the third story.

“Half of this story is Carin’s,” explained Azalea. “The servants sleep in the other half.”

A tall, curious door, much paneled, with a shining brass knob, stood before them. There

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was also a knocker of brass, shaped like a lyre. Azalea rapped with it.

"Come in," said the voice of Carin, and Azalea threw wide the door and motioned Annie Laurie to enter.

What she saw then she was never to forget. It was as bright to her, as different from anything she ever had seen, as the green Azores are to one who has ridden long upon the gray Atlantic. The room was paneled high in white, and above it, decorations of tropical flowers and parokeets made the wall gay. Muslin curtains hung at the dormer windows, beneath draperies of delicate green. Near the north window was Carin's easel, with the unfinished portrait of Azalea upon it. Chairs of green wicker stood about; a huge divan was piled with dainty pillows; in the white wooden fireplace, with its tiles of parrots, palms and pagodas, a bright fire burned. Japanese rugs of gray and white lay on the floor, and in jars of pale green, or gray, were beautiful blossoming plants.

But exquisite as the room was, and deeply as it satisfied Annie Laurie's beauty-starved heart, it was as nothing to the girl who was the center of it. In her crimson school frock, soft and



Carin stood awaiting them, her hands outstretched.

graceful, her golden hair shining on her shapely head, her eyes full of tears of repentance, Carin stood awaiting them, her hands outstretched. It all seemed so different from what Annie Laurie knew of her, that at first she hesitated to go forward, but Carin came on, still with that look of solicitude in her face.

"Oh, Annie Laurie," she said, "I see everything now. I see how I acted and how I made you feel. You'll have to forgive me. I never was like that before. It was as if imps got inside me, and the worst of it was that I seemed to want to hang on to them. I knew I was wicked, but I liked to be that way. I just wouldn't give up, though I was unhappy all the time. I told mother all about it, and she said that was the way it was when you got perverse. You liked it. Perversity seemed sweeter than anything. She said it was like being a drunkard. You enjoyed the thing that ruined you. I can see just what she meant. I'll tell you now, Annie Laurie, that after the first day or two I found myself liking you, and I hated to admit it. I tried not to as hard as I could. I didn't like mamma's putting a girl in with us without talking it over, do you see? But I do like you—I had to. The whole

trouble was that I couldn't bear to give up. But you've made me, and now I'm well again. For it's just like a spell of sickness, having a horrid, wicked idea like mine and holding on to it. Do you understand?"

Annie Laurie's face had flushed softly; her eyes were misty, her handsome, large mouth slightly tremulous. She withdrew her hands from Carin's, and put her arms close about her.

"When I say I forgive," she said, "I do."

"And do you say it?"

Annie Laurie laughed deep in her throat—and again her voice reminded one of an oriole's.

"I do say it," she said. "Your mother called it the Triple Alliance—the Three Girls' Alliance."

"We must swear fealty!" cried Azalea. She ran to the table and brought back Howard Pyle's "Robin Hood," in which the story of the forester and his faithful crew is told in equally beautiful words and pictures.

"Swear!" she commanded. Carin, laughing somewhat uncertainly, dropped her slender white hand on it. Annie Laurie laid her firm brown one over it; Azalea placed on top her

sensitive, odd hand, which always quivered when she cared about anything.

"We swear," they said in chorus.

The door opened and Miss Parkhurst entered, her arms full of books.

CHAPTER IV

A RAINY NIGHT

After that, the short days of winter passed as happily for the three girls as days can be expected to pass in a world which some discouraged person called "a vale of tears." Alert as their minds were, each was decidedly different from the other, and they had the effect of spurring each other on. Carin was, of course, really more interested in her drawing and painting than in anything else, although she was a good student, too. Annie Laurie simply devoured books, and her happiest diversion was music. A good teacher came weekly from Rutherford, a town near by, to give her instruction. But Azalea took neither drawing nor singing lessons. She had much housework to do before and after school, and her long ride down the mountain each morning and back again at night, with the fatigue it entailed, had to be taken into account. Then she helped with the sewing and with the weaving, and so had neither time nor strength for

anything else. Once Mrs. Carson said to her husband:

"Perhaps we were wrong not to insist on having Azalea live with us. It is true that few children have so much love and care given them as she has there with the dear McBirneys. But she has to share their poverty too, and their hard work. Do you think she will be worn out, Charles? Children seem so precious to me. I can't bear to see their strength wasted."

"My dear, she is being made into a very capable girl," Mr. Carson answered reassuringly. "She is having the sort of training our pioneer ancestors had, and they grew stronger for their tasks and hardships. You and I are not going to live forever, you know, and our Carin will never want to take up the work we're doing here among the mountain people. She'll be off to Paris or Rome, I suppose, picture seeing and making. But here's Azalea, in the most practical arts and crafts school possible. She sees the mountain handicrafts made every day right before her eyes, and when she's grown she'll be able to teach others. She'll come in here and take up the work where we leave off."

"Charles Carson," cried his wife indignantly,

shocked for once out of her sweet placidity, "what do you mean by speaking of us as if we were old? Why, we're hardly middle-aged."

"Aren't we?" said Mr. Carson rather wearily, yet smiling too. "I didn't know, Lucy. Sometimes it seems to me as if I had lived a long time."

His wife was silent. She knew what he meant. Who could know better? The day of blight that took from them their three fine sons had left them disinclined to go on playing the game of life. They had tried many things, and at length had come into this quiet valley, where there was so much uncomplaining poverty, where the people had latent talents that only needed encouragement to make them bread-winning forces, and they had endeavored to make themselves necessary

They had bought the beautiful old home that long years before had belonged to Azalea's grandfather, Colonel Atherton, and they had showered their favors right and left and tried to make their influence felt in all parts of the county. Their love of doing something, of building up, was as a fresh wind blowing in a sultry plain. For a lassitude had hung over the beauti-

ful valley of Lee—a lassitude born of long years of loneliness, lack of opportunity and monotony. Too little had happened; there had been too few ways of earning money; too few strangers had come that way. One day was so like another that a spell lay upon the people, and they moved as in a long dream. But it was different now. There was some use in making the strong, hand-woven cloth, the durable, quaint chairs and the curious baskets, for Mr. Carson saw that they were profitably marketed.

Mr. Carson had induced the mother of Hi Kitchell, a little worn woman with three children to support, to come down from the mountains and oversee his industries for him. He had given her a little home on the level spot known as the Field of Arrows, an ancient Indian camping ground, and here the young women came to learn the weaving of baskets and of cloth. The front room was the shop, where the people came to buy these interesting wares.

Here, too, the three girls came sometimes after school for a cup of tea and some homemade cake—for Mrs. Kitchell served these comforts to all who wished them—and sitting around her fire, they listened to her stories and told tales of their

own adventures. Sometimes there would be a dozen or more in the tea room, whiling away the tedium of a winter afternoon. Hi and the other children helped with the serving, and now and then "for the fun of it" Jim McBirney or Sam Disbrow took a hand. There always was plenty to do at the Mountain Industries, it seemed, however slack work might be elsewhere.

One day of cold rain, Azalea and Annie Laurie had stopped in at Mrs. Kitchell's for a cup of tea before they made their way to their distant homes. There was no one there that afternoon, save the sharp-eyed, busy Mrs. Kitchell, and she, having served them, went back to the loom-room and left them to themselves. The girls were excellent friends now. They trusted and admired each other—counted on each other, as true friends should.

"Azalea," said Annie Laurie, "I never understood rightly about your 'cousin Barbara.' I've heard you speak of her, but I'm not quite clear as to who she is."

Azalea laughed lightly.

"She isn't really my cousin at all," she said. "I have no kin, Annie Laurie. But I have told you, have I not, how my poor mamma and I

were traveling with a dreadful show when she died; and how we had got as far as the McBirney's cottage, and Ma McBirney—as Jim calls her—had my dear mamma buried right there near the house, where her own little Molly's grave is? Then she asked the show people to let her take me, and they wouldn't. And so the dear, brave thing took me anyway, and ran away up into the mountains with me and hid with me in a cave. And Pa McBirney and some of his friends stayed down at the house, with shotguns, and scared the show folk away. Well, Sisson, Hi Kitchell's uncle, who was at the head of the show, was terribly angry, and he made up his mind he would have me back again. So one time, when we all went off to a 'Singing,' he managed to get me, and to carry me away, and for weeks I was taken from one place to another in the mountains, away off the beaten tracks, always hiding. Oh, it was such a time, Annie!"

"I know," said the other sympathetically. "Of course I heard about that. We were all so excited, wondering if you'd be found, and I just cried when I heard that you were, and that good old Haystack Thompson was bringing you home. I didn't know you—and I couldn't even

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remember having seen you—but I felt interested in you from that moment.”

“Well, perhaps you heard that I managed to run away from the people who were hiding me, and I went down the mountain in the night, and came to the little town at the foot of it, and crept into a house there, and into a sleeping-porch with a bed in it. Oh, I was so tired—so tired it was almost like dying. I don’t really remember getting in that bed; but I was found there in the morning by Mr. Summers, who is a Methodist minister, you know. His wife is Barbara Summers. And they have the dearest baby you ever saw or heard of—Jonathan Summers, he is, bless him. Well, Mrs. Summers is just a little dear thing with brown eyes—she’s no bigger than I am. And from the minute we saw each other, we loved each other and felt at home. So we decided that we’d be kin. I write to her one week, and she writes to me the next. She sends me pictures of Jonathan that she takes with her little camera, and I send her presents when I can—little woven table-covers or baskets. You’ve no idea how sweet she is, Annie Laurie.”

“You seem to make friends whenever you please, Azalea. It’s so easy for you! The Paces

aren't like that. It's hard for them to let themselves go and say the thing that comes into their minds. We're stiff, someway. But when we do make friends, we keep them."

"Be sure to keep me, Annie Laurie. I nearly lost you through my own carelessness, and I mean to hang on to you now. Well, come, let's start for home."

But as it turned out, it was raining most dismally. A dark cloud had tumbled off the mountain and settled down over the valley, and though it was not late, it seemed almost like night.

"Goodness me," said Annie Laurie, "I don't like to think of you riding away up on the mountain a night like this. Why, you'd be drenched."

"I ought to have accepted Carin's invitation and stayed all night with her," said Azalea. "Mother doesn't expect me on bad nights. She's not to worry about me if I don't come when it rains or snows."

"Oh, stay with me, Azalea! It's just the chance I've been wanting. You've never been in my home except on that funny day when we all had conniption fits—especially Aunt Adnah. But, honestly, Aunt Adnah is a brick if you know her."

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Azalea giggled. "Yes, she did seem to have some of the properties of a brick—hardness, for example. She hit me between the eyes."

"Well, she'll make it up to you now, if you'll give her a chance. Of course she wouldn't say that she wants to make up, but she does."

"I'd just love to stay all night with you," Azalea said. "I'll take the pony back to the Carsons' stable, and then we'll walk over to your house."

"Very well. I'll go with you to the stable." They put the pony in the stall, and then, wrapped in their raincoats, tramped along over the red pine needles to Annie Laurie's home.

"Don't feel at all backward, will you, Azalea?" the other girl said as they stood on the doorstep. "You just have a little pluck and everything will come out all right."

Azalea laughed.

"You don't half understand me yet, Annie Laurie," she said. "You're so much more serious than I am. I can't help enjoying things even when they are serious. I know I oughtn't to feel that way, but I think it will be awfully funny to see your Aunt Adnah's face when she finds I've had the impudence to come again."

Annie Laurie frowned a trifle. She was not quite sure she liked to have her aunt regarded as amusing. However, they went in together. The door of the grim little parlor was closed, but the living-room door stood open and Annie Laurie led the way in. There was an ugly brussels carpet on the floor, and a center table covered with a chenille cloth; on it was the reading lamp, and ranged about it were comfortable chairs. A black marble clock ticked noisily on the mantel shelf, and a low fire smouldered among the ashes. The scrim curtains had many colored figures in them, and helped to keep out the light of the declining day. Azalea could not help contrasting it with the exquisite rooms at The Shoals, and with the quaint, charming rooms in the McBirney cabin. She could understand some of the bitter things that Annie Laurie had said to her—could see that, somehow, life had been commonplace for this girl from the first, and that, though she did not altogether realize it, it was this commonplaceness which made her dissatisfied.

"Wherever can the aunts be?" said Annie Laurie. "The fire is out in the kitchen, and there are no signs of supper. Usually at this

hour, things are humming like a bee hive. Take off your things, Azalea. I'll hang them up where they'll dry. You sit right down before the fire, and I'll bring in some wood."

"But let me help, Annie Laurie."

"No, no. You're company. I don't often have company." She went away with Azalea's things and then came back and stood looking at her guest with her glowing eyes. "Azalea," she said intensely, "I never have company!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not. I'm not supposed to want it. I'm to study and work, and mend and practice my music, and be doing something from early till late. It isn't that they're not kind to me—my aunts and my father—but they're so dreadfully serious and conscientious."

"It *does* throw a damper over everything, being conscientious like that," mused Azalea.

Annie Laurie looked startled to hear her own secret idea put in words.

"For goodness sake," she cried, "don't let the aunts hear you say that!"

Azalea laughed teasingly.

"I'd really like to try that on Aunt Adnah," she said.

Annie Laurie was getting used to her friend, and she made no reply. She ran upstairs for a moment, and came down clothed in a warm brown wrapper, and carrying another one of equally uninviting color on her arm.

"Slip into this, Azalea," she commanded, "and let me hang your dress out in the hall near the heater. There now, lie down on the sofa—so. I'll lie down too with my head the other way, and we'll wrap ourselves in my grandfather's old army blankets. I'm dead tired, aren't you? I don't see *where* the aunts are."

She yawned wearily, and Azalea caught the contagion and stretched her pretty mouth in imitation.

"Oh, it's cosy, isn't it?" Azalea murmured. Neither spoke again. Their eyes were fixed on the smouldering coals, which seemed to hypnotize them, and presently they both slept.

Just how long they lay there, comfortably resting, Azalea could not tell, but when she opened her eyes the twilight had deepened. Annie Laurie was still deep in sleep. The fire had quickened, and by its glow Azalea could see that some one had entered the room. For a moment she was startled, but then she saw that

it was Annie Laurie's father, Simeon Pace; so she lay still, not liking to speak, since she was not sure he would know her. He did not see the two girls on the sofa, and it was quite evident that he thought himself alone. Azalea watched him sleepily, and saw him take off his coat and throw it on the chair. Then he began twisting his arm in a most inhuman manner, and Azalea's blood was frozen as she saw him loosen it at the elbow and lay it beside the coat, until she chanced to remember about its being merely a tin substitute for an arm. His next act was to take a long pocketbook or wallet from the mantel, draw something from it, stuff it into his hollow arm and deftly strap the arm into place again.

"How funny," thought Azalea. "How Jim will laugh when I tell him about it!"

Then she remembered that she had been unintentionally spying, and that it would not be at all fair to tell what she had seen. She knew Ma McBirney would not like her to mention anything she had seen under such circumstances. So she lay as still as a lizard, hardly breathing, and finally Mr. Pace left the room. A moment later she heard the two aunts bustling about in

the kitchen. There was a poking at the stove, a lighting of lamps, a rattling of dishes, and it was evident that the household was being set in motion again.

"Where are you, Annie Laurie, child?" called the voice of Miss Zillah. "We've been out to the sewing circle, and it was so late before the refreshments were served that we couldn't hold our business meeting till after five. Then on the way home we heard Mrs. Disbrow was worse and Hannah laid up with a cold and we dropped in to see them, though I must say they're a shiftless lot. We thought you and your father wouldn't mind if supper was a little late. What you lying there for, child? And mercy me, how big you look! Why, no wonder, there's two of you. It's you, Azalea? How do you do?"

"I'm very well, ma'am," said Azalea rather shyly. "I hope you didn't mind my coming. It was so rainy and horrid, Annie Laurie asked me to spend the night."

"Why, you're as welcome as sunrise, of course. Sister Adnah, here is Azalea McBirney. She's come to spend the night with us."

Azalea wondered what was going to happen

then. Miss Adnah had been quite vicious on the occasion of her former visit; but the mischievous spirit in the girl made her rather enjoy the uncertainty. Miss Adnah, she decided, could do no more than eat her up. But Miss Adnah was over her bad temper. She came in holding out her hand gravely.

"It was a wise thing for you to stay in the valley to-night," she said primly. "I'm sure Mrs. McBirney wouldn't want you to climb the mountain in such a drizzle."

She avoided committing herself to a mere piece of flattery. She didn't say she was glad Azalea was there, but for some reason, the girl did not feel chilled. She knew Annie Laurie wanted her, and it seemed to her that as the daughter of the house, Annie Laurie ought to enjoy some privileges. However, a few minutes later, when she was in Annie Laurie's sober, tidy room, putting on her dress and freshening her hair, she overheard Miss Zillah saying softly to Annie Laurie in the next room:

"Sister Adnah thinks you should not invite anyone to the house without first asking permission, my dear. As for myself, I'm glad to see

you have friends and feel free to ask them, but it would be well to make certain preparations."

"Not at all, Aunt Zillah," answered Annie Laurie hotly. "I've never had a girl to stay all night—never. I asked Azalea because it was raining. I couldn't tell it was going to rain, or that I was going to ask her. I'm old enough now to use some sense, I hope, and I want it so that I can act without first having a period of fasting and prayer. You and Aunt Adnah were late to-night—"

"My dear, it is the first time we have been late to our duties, so far as I can remember, since we assumed them."

"Oh, you don't understand at all. I'm glad you were late. Why shouldn't you be, if you wished? And your duties—why do you speak of what you do in the house like that? It's not a duty to live and work and eat and sleep and all. It's a pleasure. At least, that's the way Carin and Azalea look at it. What I wanted to say was that for once you acted on impulse. You stayed till meeting was out, and you stopped in to see some sick neighbors. Well, I think that's fine. Now, I asked my friend to stay all night. No preparation is needed. The cellar is burst-

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ing with food, the pantry is plumb full of it; there's milk and cream to float a town and butter enough to grease all the engines in the world—"

"Annie Laurie!"

"Well, Aunt Adnah wears my patience out. I'm going to ask my friends here when it seems best."

"My dear, you know we only ask you to use judgment."

"Judgment? I don't know what that means. I'll use hospitality, if you like, and courtesy—"

"To your aunts, among others, I hope."

"Bless your heart!" Azalea heard Annie Laurie cry softly. "You're a dear, Aunt Zillah. Was I ever rude to you?"

"Not directly, my dear child. But you sometimes speak of my sister in a manner which I cannot regard as really respectful."

"Forgive me, Aunt Zillah. I've too much mustard and pepper in my disposition. But there's the supper bell. Azalea! Azalea, are you ready?"

They sat down at a bountiful table, and Simon Pace folded his hand of flesh and his hand of tin together and prayed long and loud—something about the "sundering of joints and mar-

row." Azalea, who was very hungry, hardly seemed to get the drift of these words. But she was startled from her dazed reverie by a sharp inquiry from Mr. Pace.

"So you two girls were asleep there before the fire, were you? Did you see me when I came in?" He turned his large eyes—so like and yet so unlike Annie Laurie's—upon first one girl and then the other.

"I didn't," said his daughter.

"And you, Miss Azalea?"

"I awoke while you were in the room," she said, feeling somewhat like Jack when he talked with the Giant Eater.

"So?" he looked at her sharply. "Why didn't you speak?"

"I—I wasn't sure you'd know me, sir." She paused a moment and sat steady under the look he kept upon her. "Anyway, I was just as good as asleep—half dreaming."

"And you never tell your dreams, I hope? It's a bad habit."

Azalea smiled at him.

"I never, never tell them, sir," she said.

"Good," cried Simeon Pace. "A sensible girl

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wouldn't, of course. Let me serve you some meat, Miss Azalea."

And she understood clearly that she had given a tacit promise that she would not tell what she had seen; and Simeon Pace felt the reliable character of her, beneath her soft, girlish aspect, and trusted her.

CHAPTER V

THE SUMMERS

While they were at supper a strong cold wind sprung up, so that Mr. Pace had to heap wood on the fire. And afterward, when the two girls ran to the door, they could see that the sky had cleared and the stars were out, looking, it seemed, unusually large and bright and sociable.

"Why not go to prayer meeting?" said Azalea.

"At your church or mine?"

"Oh, if you don't mind, Annie Laurie, at mine this time. Dear old Elder Mills is leaving, you know. You've heard how sick he is with the rheumatism, haven't you? He's going down to Florida where the climate will be better for him. They say he's wonderful these last few weeks. He's trying to say everything he can think of that will help the people he's known so long. I love to hear people talk when they are really, really in earnest, don't you?"

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Annie Laurie looked at her friend understandingly.

"You are just like me, Azalea; you always want mountains to be higher than they really are, and stars brighter, and sermons deeper, and friends more loving. Nothing is ever quite big enough to suit me—nor quite *hard* enough."

"Not intense enough, Carin would say."

"That's it. Yes, let's go to prayer meeting. I'll ask father if I may."

They presently were on their way, walking briskly because they were late. The little Methodist church was full of the old friends of Elder Mills, who as he stood before them, his white hair hanging around his shoulders, his face haggard with pain, yet had a look in his eyes of exaltation and joy which seemed to make a light thing of his physical distress.

"Oh, I want you to love one another," he said during the evening. "I want you to forgive one another. Be honest, be brave in saying what you think, live truly, avoid lies. Above everything, avoid lies—in word and in act."

"For goodness sake," thought Annie Laurie, "Can't preachers find anything else to talk about but lies? Whether I go to my own church or

another, that seems to be the theme." She remembered how she had caught Sam Disbrow's eye that day at the Baptist church when the minister had been talking about lies, and how queer it had been to realize that she was reading Sam's mind, and could tell that he, like herself, was wondering why the preacher kept harping on that. Annie Laurie's mind drifted off to Sam's home—to his mother who never was well, to their untidy little house, and to his cross-eyed sister, who never would make friends with anybody. Sam seemed so different from the rest of the family, with his hearty downright ways, his energy, his determination to make something of himself.

Was meeting over? She aroused herself as from a dream.

"There's to be a business meeting," Azalea said to her as the people arose. "They're to talk about who is to be our new minister. Since it is not conference time, we are to ask for some one we want, and then if the bishop thinks best we can have him."

"I see," said Annie Laurie vaguely. Though she did not really see.

The two girls started out together, crowding

softly by their elders who were gathered about in the aisles talking over the trial that had come to the church in losing Elder Mills, and in being obliged to bring a new minister in at the middle of the session. And then, suddenly, a beautiful idea came to Azalea. Why couldn't they ask the Rev. Absalom Summers? He was in that tiny backwoods village where there were so few to hear or enjoy him; and he was such a wonderful man, all wrapped up in his religion, and talking about it as if it must be the business of everyone. And if he came, her "pretend cousin" Barbara, his wife, would come also, and that blessed baby, Jonathan. To think was to act with Azalea, now as always. She broke from Annie Laurie and ran up to her old friend and protector, Haystack Thompson.

"Oh, Mr. Thompson, dear," she whispered, "if only you could manage to put in a word for Mr. Summers! You know what he is—how he talks and sings and laughs and keeps everybody stirred up. He'd put life into any church, wouldn't he? He's just wasted down in that little valley where he lives. Hardly anybody comes to church, and those who do, don't like

him. They think he's too new-fashioned. But here he'd be appreciated."

"Well, now," drawled Mr. Thompson, running his hand through his wild head of hair—the hair that gave him his nickname of "Haystack"—"I don't know but there might be something in that. He sure has got a lot of ginger in him, 'the power of the Lord,' he calls it, and I reckon maybe that's what it is. Anyway, as you insinuate, Zalie, the Seven Sleepers would have had a hard time of it trying to keep up their slumbers anywhere around his neighborhood."

"And then Mrs. Summers," went on Azalea breathlessly; "think what she would mean to the church! She's so lively, you know, and so interested in everyone—sorry for them when she ought to be, and happy with them all other times."

"Sharin' their sorrows an' their joys with 'em, I reckon you mean, daughter."

"Yes; and the baby—"

"Of course, the baby! He'd be a drawin' card to any congregation."

"Oh, Mr. Thompson, if I could have that baby around I'd—"

"Yes?"

"I'd—I'd be good all the rest of my days."

"Be a practicin' Christian, eh? Well, as you say, Summers is a mighty fetching man—don't know of any with more—well, more radiation. I reckon I'd better mention him to the bretherin. Perhaps the bishop would hear to his being moved up this a-way—particularly if I told him you was wantin' to play with the baby."

Azalea never cared how much fun her kind old Haystack made of her. He had followed her over mountains and through valleys, in sun and rain, in a certain terrible episode of her life, when she had been stolen away from Mrs. McBirney and all but forced back into her hateful life with a traveling show, and she let him joke and fleer all he pleased, knowing him, as she did, for one of her staunchest friends.

"Yes, please do," she urged. "They're just going into meeting now. Just tell them how he laughs and talks and cuts up!"

"Fine recommendations for a pastor!"

"Well, they are," insisted Azalea. "Of course they are. He wants everyone to be as good and happy as he is, and if they aren't, he'll find out why."

Haystack Thompson brought his huge brows together and regarded Azalea with his sharp eyes. Neither spoke for a moment. Then: "Yes-sum," he said, and moved toward the front to join the representative members of the congregation.

So it came about that a month later Azalea had the great happiness of knowing that her friends, the Reverend Absalom Summers and his wife and baby were coming to Lee as the result of her suggestion. It was rather a joke among those who knew of it. "Azalea's choice" they called the new minister. But it was no joke to Azalea. It meant more to her than she ever could explain.

"You see," she said to Carin, "it's ideas that count—right ideas. Now, I'm a person of no importance whatever. But because I happened to have the right idea, those men listened to me and did what I wanted them to do."

"And the point of it all is," laughed Carin, "that if you have enough right ideas and can find enough persons to listen to them, you'll *be* important, see?"

"Don't laugh," said Azalea. "If you knew

what it meant for me to have the Summerses come—”

“I know well enough—know too well. After they come, what chance will I have of getting your attention?”

“Carin, how can you? No one can take your place. My friends are all separate. I can’t spare one, and not one can take the place of another.”

They were in Carin’s pony cart as they held this conversation, on their way down to the station, and it seemed as they drove along the one macadamized road in the county, that everyone they knew was bent in the same direction.

True, it was nighttime, but the lanterns and lamps revealed the identity of the travelers. Amusements were not many at Lee, and the coming of the new Methodist minister and his family was an event worthy of notice. Moreover, the fame of the Reverend Absalom Summers had gone abroad. His strong bright gifts, his hearty, brotherly nature, his way of finding nothing too small for his interest or too great for his inquisitiveness, had won him friends. So they gathered—these friendly, waiting neighbors—

in the draughty little waiting room of the station and waited for the nine o'clock train.

The peculiarities of this nine o'clock train were well known. It had acquired a habit of arriving at about a quarter of ten, and it was not until the hands of the clock and of the frequently consulted watches of the male members approached that hour, that anyone thought of going out to look up the track. But there it was, sure enough, faithful to the time it had chosen for itself. Its flaring headlight could be seen away up the mountains. The air was nipping, and the company of watchers shivered together, but they would none of them go back into the station now that the headlight really was in sight.

Moreover, though they would not say so, they loved to be out among the mountains—those mountains that were as the very soul of their lives, that held them together, that gave meaning to their secret motives, to their religion, to their daily work. They loomed now, darkest purple against the starry sky. The wind swept down from them, fresh with an indescribable freshness. An owl called—was silent—then called again. Lights shone out from the houses in the village, and from the scattered cabins

along the mountain sides. Now and then there was a movable light high on the mountain, as some hill farmer made his way to his house from a neighbor's, or from his visit to town, or from looking after his stock.

The headlight disappeared as the train swept around the horseshoe bend. Then it burst upon them like a menacing star. It rushed towards them. There was a shriek as of a giant taken prisoner. The train was there! The conductor got down and exchanged greetings, and an enormously tall and thin man appeared, carrying many bundles.

"There he is! It's the Elder. There's Mr. Summers," cried the people. They surged forward, pulled the man from the steps, seized his bundles, and waited while he assisted a little lady to alight.

"Why, she isn't as large as we are, Azalea," whispered Carin.

"I know," Azalea whispered back, quivering as she hugged her companion's arm. "I told you—"

But Carin was not to know what Azalea had told her, for at that moment the voice of the little lady was heard saying:

"And where's Azalea?"

It was, for Azalea, a thrilling moment. Afterward, thinking it all over, she could not tell why her heart so leaped at that first word. Was it because she had no kin, really, that this voice of loving friendship was so sweet to her? Was it that she was proud—she who had been a wanderer and a beggar—to be asked for before all the people? Was it just abounding love for Barbara Summers, her "pretend cousin"?

It made no difference, really. There was Barbara, her dark eyes shining; there was her babe in her arms, fresh and wonderful from sleep; and there was his mother offering him to Azalea.

The two kissed above the baby.

"Honey bunch!" murmured Azalea, and gathered him into her arms.

She saw nothing of how the people came forward to make Mr. Summers and his wife welcome; heard nothing of what Pa McBirney said to them, urging them into his comfortable old mountain wagon. Even the voice of Carin was vague in her ears, though she knew she was murmuring her appreciation of golden curls and blue eyes, of tiny teeth, of dimples, or chub-

by little hands. But nothing that anybody could say would be too much, Azalea thought. Her hungry heart, never yet satisfied, with all the love that had come to her, wrapped a thousand quivering tendrils about this little laughing child.

"You ridin' with Miss Carin, Zalie?" asked Pa McBirney.

"Yes, thank you, father. We'll drive right up to the parsonage, won't we, Carin?"

"As fast as Mustard can take us," replied Carin. "The baby won't mind leaving you a moment, will he, Mrs. Summers?"

Barbara Summers shook her head. She was not given to passing Jonathan over to the care of others, but there was something in the satisfied expression of Azalea's face that forbade her to take him away.

Carin turned the head of the little yellow pony toward the Methodist parsonage. They had a hill to climb and a dark, curving little road to traverse. But five or six vehicles were ahead of them, and Mustard, who felt like a mere boy in the horse world, and who always was pleased if he could get in a grown-up affair of any kind, trotted along importantly. Lights

shone out from among the armored pines. Azalea got out and carried Jonathan through the freshly decorated rooms, with their newly polished furniture and snowy curtains, to the bedroom where the little iron cot awaited Jonathan.

"Shut the door, Carin dear," she whispered happily. "Let's undress him. His mother said we'd find his nightie in that bag."

CHAPTER VI

SUNDAY

"Once there was a bear,
And he made his pasture there;
And he crept, and he crept, and he crept,
"Till he got away up there!"
"Gurgle—gurgle—gurgle!"
"And once there was a bear—"

This conversation took place between Azalea McBirney and Jonathan Summers one Sunday morning while Jonathan's mother was at church. Azalea had been to Sunday-school, and had run over to ask her "Cousin" Barbara if she wouldn't like to attend service to hear her husband preach. Barbara would—Oh, most undeniably she would. It was her firm conviction that if all men could hear her husband, and would give heed to what he said, they would be able to resist all temptations and would live in peace with the world. So she kissed Azalea and permitted her to button her into her pretty golden-brown frock, and then, clapping her large hat over her

wayward hair and putting on her gloves as she hastened down the street, she was off, her heart beating high with loving pride of the man whose life was united with her own, and who had already found warm friends in his new parish.

Jonathan had been asleep when his mother left him, but it was not long before he opened his eyes and looked about him to see whom he could get to serve him. For Jonathan was, in his own opinion, the Prince of the World, and everyone in it was to do his bidding. He preferred, of course, his chief slave—the one called “Mamma”—and not seeing her, he opened his mouth and let out a more or less cheerful roar, not so much showing rage, as a healthful imitation of it.

Azalea was delighted. She picked him up, fed him his bottle, arranged him among the sofa pillows, and then, taking a dimpled hand in her own, she pointed delicately to the rosy palm.

“Once there was a bear,
And he made his pasture there.”

It must have been a particularly small bear to have pastured in such a tiny pink palm, but Jonathan saw nothing inconsistent in it, and remarked enthusiastically:

"Gurgle—gurgle—gurgle."

The bear began creeping slyly up Jonathan's arm. It snuggled for a moment at his elbow, went on—and Jonathan shivered happily—up to his shoulder, and then settled right down in his neck, and seemed to think it a good place to stay. At least, Jonathan laughed delightedly.

Azalea looked at him with her soul in her eyes.

"Mercy me," she sighed. "How well I understand kidnappers!"

Then she remembered that she had once been kidnapped herself, and that she had not liked it at all.

"Oh, Jonathan," she cried, looking at him critically, "it seems impossible that anything as soft and lovely as you are can grow up to be just a hard, common, big man! If only I could put you in some kind of a preserve jar and keep you the way you are, I'd just give anything. Tired of sitting still? Well, come to Azalea, and we'll go exploring. It's a pretty house, isn't it? But my goodness, you ought to have seen it a little while ago! It was as dull as Monday washday.

"Then, when it was decided that your papa

and mamma were coming here to live, we all turned in and worked like sixty to make it look nice. Haystack Thompson—that's the man that throws you up so high, you know—prepared it with his own hands. But you make up your mind we didn't let him pick out the paper. Haystack is a dear, but he couldn't be trusted to pick out wall paper. No, sir, my friends Carin and Annie Laurie and I did that. Brown for the sitting room, and green for the dining room, and pink and pale blue for the bedrooms.

“And we got these pretty print hangings and covers—at least, Mrs. Carson paid for them and we picked them out. And Ma McBirney wove these rugs—brown for the sitting room and green for the dining room. Aren't they beauties? And Mr. Carson had the furniture done at his shop—the very best he could make. And Sam Disbrow, he brought this fern, and somebody else sent the palm, and Carin gave the pictures, and Annie Laurie made the table cover, and I don't know what all. You see, some of these people don't belong to your church at all, Jonathan. They just gave these things because you were so sweet that they couldn't bear to have you come into any but a pretty house. Dear me,

boy, stop pulling my hair! You treat me just as if I were a step-child. And I'm not. I'm your pretend cousin—which is ever and ever so much nicer than being a real cousin, because you do your own picking out."

Jonathan replied after his own manner, and the morning wore on pleasantly. Azalea put the potatoes and the stew over to cook, and made some apple sauce. Then she set the table; and "toted" Jonathan some more. For once she forgot to think. The sad little thoughts that would mope around in the back of her mind, because she was, after all, a child without a father or a mother, kept entirely out of sight that morning. She was so busy that she could waste no time whatever on merely thinking; and the first thing she knew she saw the people pouring along the street from church.

Annie Laurie drove by with her aunts and her father, and waved to Azalea. Sam Disbrow walked by with his father, and Azalea thought what a dull time Sam had of it, with that heavy looking father with his hanging head and big, rolling eyes, both going home to a mother who was always sick, and to that queer sister of Sam's, who had too much work to do,

and who never seemed to want to talk with anybody. And then the Carson carriage rushed by with black Ben driving, and Mr. Carson, so handsome and straight, beside him, and Carin and Mrs. Carson on the back seat in their beautiful furs, smiling and bowing to everybody.

Then the McBirney wagon came, with Mr. and Mrs. Summers in with Pa and Ma McBirney and Jim. And Azalea was thanked and kissed, and had the pain of seeing Jonathan tear himself away from her to rush to his mother's embrace, and then Azalea went out and got in with her foster parents, and Pa McBirney hissed to his horses in an odd way he had, and they started for their long drive up the mountain.

"It sure is a mighty curious thing how that man goes on, Mary," said Mr. McBirney to his wife as they were driving by the prosperous dairy farm of Simeon Pace. "He's jest rolling up money, but no one can tell what he does with it. Heller, the banker, he says nary a cent of it comes his way. Pace don't believe in banks—got stung some time I reckon, and lost his nest egg by the busting of a bank. Anyhow, he hangs on to what he gets nowadays. It beats all to see anyone so old-fashioned. Heller says he sup-

poses he hides it away in his old stocking or buries it in the yard. I suppose I'm something of a mossback myself, but anyway I know enough to bank my money when I get it—which ain't any too often."

"He don't look like such an old-fashioned man, Simeon Pace don't," mused Mrs. McBirney. "He certainly does keep his place up right smart. Them cattle o' his'n is the best to be seen in the country, and everything around the place is right up in G."

"Well, old-fashioned he is, but he's far-seeing too. About five years ago he bought the Caruth Valley and all the uplying land beyond it. I couldn't see what his idea was, but now I hear that he's selling it out to Mr. Carson for five times what he paid for it. Mr. Carson wants it for the water power on it. He's adding to his factory, you see."

"That will mean work for a good many more of us mountain folks," observed Mrs. McBirney. "The way Mr. Carson has opened up things for us is just stirring to think about. I don't know as his efforts are appreciated, but I, for one, know who I have to thank when I see the new things in the house and the good new clothes

we've been able to get for the children. Why, only this morning I was calling Jim's attention to it. 'Look at you,' I said, 'in your store clothes and brown shoes and new overcoat and all. You look like a rich man's son,' says I. And I declare to goodness when I got out this here new cloak o' mine, and this bonnet Mrs. Carson made for me out of silk velvet and a real ostrich tip, I could hardly believe it was me. I'm so used to wearing rusty black that I don't know as I feel quite at home in good deep black like this a-here."

Jim McBirney, who was sitting on the back seat with Azalea, not caring to listen longer to the conversation of his elders and knowing it was bad manners to disturb them, began whispering.

"I went to Sam Disbrow's house last evening, sis." When Jim said "evening" he meant afternoon.

"Did you, Jim? What was it like?"

"Shades all down—rooms all hot—Mrs. Disbrow lying on the settle—Hannah sitting by her, knitting and knitting, and her eyes so crossed you couldn't think how she could do anything but cross stitch."

"I'm sorry for Hannah. That's a dreadful life to lead—being shut up all the time with a sick person. I've a good mind to give her a party if mother will let me."

"Give Hannah Disbrow a party? Why, she'd run like a hare if she saw anybody coming, and she'd drop her ice cream and go home crying. I know Hannah."

He spoke as if he had made girls and their outlandish ways his particular study.

"Well, anyway, I'm going to see her. And I'll get the other girls to go."

"Oh, yes, th' other girls! Why, Zalie, you can't move around by your lone no more; you're just hitched on to them friends of yours. Ain't you ever going to have any separate thoughts again?"

Azalea laughed lightly, and at the chime of her merriment Mary McBirney turned around to look at the occupants of the rear seat. It was at such times that Azalea loved her most—when the light of love flooded her face with its high brow and soft eyes. It always made Azalea feel as if there must be a lamp burning there behind the kind face. She gave a pleasant, inarticulate murmur that served better than words to let the

children know that her love was round about them. Then she turned back to resume her conversation with her husband, and the horses—nimble mountain-climbers—pulled on up the road steadily, stopping now and again to breathe, and then sweeping around another curve of the ever winding road.

Azalea amused herself by noticing the little plateaus or “benches” along the mountain side. She played a little game with herself, building imaginary houses in this cove or on that bench among the maples. There was one place in particular, where three lofty tulip trees guarded a spring of cold water, and where there was a little almost level cove from which one could look off for miles and miles along the purple valley, where she put first one sort of a house and then another.

When she began thinking of it, she built—in her mind of course—a little house of cedar logs, with an open chamber between, like the one she now called home; but as time went on she changed her plans. Barbara Summers had tried to persuade her that a rambling bungalow of pine, with high chimneys and wide porches would be the thing; and Carin had been in favor

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of a cement bungalow with a pergola with trumpet vines growing over it. Annie Laurie thought it would be better to have a tent pitched there, and to eat off wooden plates and use paper napkins.

"Then you could heave everything into the fire," said this practical young woman, "and there'd be no dishes to wash."

As they passed the place this Sunday Azalea asked Jim what kind of a house he thought it would be best to put up there, but Jim was not fond of playing at air castles.

"We-all don't own the land," he said, "and we ain't got the money for the house, so what's the use of talking?"

Azalea felt just a trifle out of patience.

"The use of talking," she said rather sharply, "is that it interests you."

"Keeping still interests me all right."

"Keep still, then, if you want to. I'm sure I've plenty to think about."

It was then that Mary McBirney began singing softly:

"'Sweet are the hillsides, pleasant are the valleys,
Bright is the sky o'er the home of my heart.'"

Both Azalea and Jim knew very well why she was singing. She never could bear to reprove them; and she had a little theory that music could drive out any evil spirit. Such music as she made ought to, certainly, the children thought, sitting for a moment in silence, ashamed of their stupid quarrel. Neither one was of the sort to sulk. Jim gave a little twist on his seat, and joined in the fourth line:

“‘And my home, gentle friend, is wherever thou art.’”

Azalea loved the quaint old song. It was one of many such which Mary McBirney knew.

“I’d love to see the words and music of the songs you sing, mother,” Azalea had said to her once. “Where can I find them? Are they in any of the books you have?”

But Mary McBirney had shaken her head with a smile.

“The mountain folks have many a song that never yet has been writ down, child,” she said. “In the lonely nights in the little cabins away back on the mountains, all still and peaceful, the folks weave the songs out of their hearts. Grandmothers and mothers and daughters have sung them, and not one of them all had the

knowledge to write them down. They make me think of wild roses. They grow beside the roadway, and they are the sweetest of them all."

"'Early in the morning I can hear the thrushes singing,'" Mary McBirney sang on, and Azalea, joining in, put all her love for the sweet woman into the words:

"'Dear as the voice that I love best of all.'"

They stopped at the waterfall for the horses to drink. The cataract leaped down delicately and gayly from the height above, paused at the roadway, rippling along among the pebbles at the edges and rushing between the great boulders in the center of the ford, and then with a wild laugh plunged off over the edge and foamed down the mountain side. The sky was rather overcast on this particular day, and the trees wore a patient look; even the waterfall seemed subdued, and its rush of sound was more liquid and less like music than on brighter days. A heaviness and quietude lay over everything. But the McBirneys loved the mountain in all its moods, and little by little they set themselves to fit in with its whims, so that by the time they reached their home they were quiet, too.

But they were happy—Oh, most distinctly,

they were that. They loved every inch of the old place. The cabin of logs, divided in the center with an open air chamber, the little loft where Azalea slept, looking up the mountain side, the Pride of India tree beneath which lay the graves of little Molly McBirney and of Azalea's poor mother, the tulip trees at the outlook, the little smithy, the stable, the barn, the smoke house, the corn crib, the chicken house and the bee hives, the pigeon coops and the swinging gourds where the martins nested, all were dear to them. Vines, flowers, and bushes grew all about them. The farm slanted down the hillside at a dangerous angle, but contrived to soak into its produce the sweet Southern sun, and it gave of its rich bounty in return for Thomas McBirney's hard toil.

Human care and enthusiasm showed in every foot of it. Even the most casual passer-by could see at a glance that here was a home in which people lived who loved life and each other.

"Happy and good folk live here," it seemed to say.

And there were, first and last, a good many to read its message, for it was on the highway and whoever came over Tennyson Mountain

down to Lee must pass almost through the doorway.

This gray, pleasant Sunday, Mrs. McBirney and Azalea jumped from the wagon at the house door, and Jim and his father went on to the stable to look after the horses. The cow was munching contentedly in her stall, but the chickens seemed a little depressed and in need of their midday drink of hot water and their feeding of hot meal. The pigeons cooed chillily from their cote. As for the horses, they knew almost as much about unhitching as their betters, and if either Jim or Mr. McBirney had done anything they ought not to have done they would have turned their critical eyes upon them. The real pride of Jim's heart, however, was the two ponies which he and Azalea rode to school. They had been the gift of Mr. Carson to them, and they were the brothers of Carin's pony, Mustard, and bore the exciting names of Pepper and Paprika.

Jim lingered for a moment or two, loath to leave them. He loved the velvet noses of them the friendly eyes and the warm heaving sides. They muzzled him, and he put their noses in his neck and gave them to understand that their affection was returned. The cool, damp air

billowing in at the door was delicious, and he almost hated to go in the house.

"What's the use in living in houses?" he thought. He had known a young fellow who traveled over the mountains all the time with two ponies. One he rode, the other carried his pack which consisted of a hammock, a frying pan, some blankets and a square of canvas, out of which he could, at need, fashion a sort of tent. He never had slept under a roof since he was a baby. Jim thought of this boy as a very fortunate fellow. He chose not to remember the desperate ill health that had driven the lad into the life. However, he must go in the house, he must! Ma had got the fire going in the kitchen, judging from the smoke that rolled from the chimney. Well, he was glad he didn't have to build it. He didn't feel like doing anything just then—except, perhaps, sitting by the door and looking off at the valley. Usually when he wanted to do this, some one straightway thought of some chore for him. So he slid softly onto the bench, sitting where he could be seen neither from the door nor the window, and fell into a comfortable though somewhat hungry day dream.

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Meantime, odors of frying chicken were wafted to him, along with the smell of slightly burned corn cake and very good coffee. The odors grew stronger and pleasanter and after a time Jim decided that he wasn't doing right to stay outside while everyone was working in the house. It really was his duty to go in. So in he went. The fire was leaping, the table was set, his mother was bustling around in her calico dress, Azalea was putting the chairs to the table, and his father looked ready primed for a long Sunday grace.

It proved to be even longer than Jim had feared. Thomas McBirney was one of those who count it a fault if they neglect to mention every event of their lives to the Almighty. He thanked the Lord for their united family, for food and fire, for roof and friends, for the privilege of attending divine service, and for the love of God which warmed their hearts. Meantime his son's eyes wandered restlessly from the heaped plate of chicken to the bowl of gravy and "fixin's." He wondered if he would have no more than a "drumstick" and why there should be such intimate relations between boys and drumsticks. The world over, fathers

seemed to think they should go to their sons. No doubt Chinese fathers held just the same opinion.

Imagine then, his surprise—his unbelieving surprise—when his father, having first served his mother and Azalea, took the “wish-bone,” beautifully burdened with tender white meat and laid it on Jim’s plate.

“For a good boy,” he said, as he heaped on the potatoes and gravy, and passed the corn bread. “Once in a while, Jim, we men folks have to set ourselves against these here women, eh? Them with their wishbones! Who said they was to eternally have the wishbones? No king that ever I hearn tell of. I say, let’s head a revolution and declare that they ken have only every other wishbone. That’s fair, ain’t it?”

A nice, warm feeling gathered in Jim’s heart. It was splendid to have a dad like that—a dad who could tell what was going on in a fellow’s mind. And his mother and Azalea seemed to be glad he had the wishbone, too. They were looking at him just the way a fellow likes to have his family look at him. My, what a nice day Sunday was! And wasn’t he glad he had helped haul those hickory logs! And wasn’t

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the room nice, with the settle there next the fire, and the old clock tickin', tickin' away, and striking now and then with a voice like Haystack Thompson's when he led in prayer. And there was a white table cloth on for Sunday, and Ma was smiling almost the way she used before Molly died. And the cat was stretching herself, and outside, Peter, the hound, was sniffing to let them know he was there and hadn't had his dinner yet.

"Goodness gracious," sighed Jim, "ain't it lucky we're all alive!"

CHAPTER VII

THE SIGNAL

Night came down sweetly over the mountain that quiet day. It wrapped the village in soft gray folds; the stars came out hazily and shone with a misty golden light; the wind merely whispered in the pines and the hemlocks, and the sound of the falling water was lonely and sad in the ears of Azalea.

Yet she had to be out in the night because—well, that's a secret. At least it was a secret from Jim. Because he would have laughed. She was to signal the other two girls. It had been agreed upon.

"You see, I nearly die, Sundays," Annie Laurie had said. "Our house—really I can't describe our house on Sunday. I feel as if my heart were turning into old red sandstone."

To have the strong-beating heart of Annie Laurie turn into structural rock was something the friends could not permit. Anyway it would be an excellent thing for Azalea in the moun-

tain to know that her friends in the valley were doing well. She could tell if they were doing well, if the lantern was waved sideways; if anything was wrong it was to be swung up and down.

"But I reckon you-all had better not swing it up and down," she had said, "for though I'll know by that that something is wrong, of course I won't know what it is. And the waiting to find out would be dreadful."

"It will have to be a pretty dreadful 'something' to make us give the bad signal, won't it, Annie Laurie?" Carin had remarked.

So it was with a light heart and a mysterious manner that Azalea, who was supposed to leave the kitchen-living room to go to her own little loft, stole out the back way, took the lantern from its nail, lighted it, and crept to the outlook. She had five minutes to wait before the time appointed, and these moments proved to be a "perfect caution" for slowness. She counted the seconds to make sure—and yet was not sure, for she managed to get in about two counts and a half to each second. However, at last she felt justified in bringing out her light from behind the tree bole where she had hidden it, and wav-

ing it back and forth in enthusiastic announcement that all was right. She couldn't help thinking with a throb of the heart how very, very right it all was! How sweet the day had been; how filled with comfort for body and soul; how beautiful to be loved as she was loved in that little home! Of course she might have repined that she had not been made Carin's adopted sister and surrounded with all manner of luxuries, but the love she felt for Mrs. McBirney was too deep, too sincere, to permit such a thought to have a place in her heart for very long.

Yes, her home was a log cabin, and her family simple mountain people. But she could not feel cheated. The taste of the Things That Were was sweet on her palate, and her hope for the future bubbled in her heart as the spring, whose whispering she could hear, bubbled from the ground.

So back and forth in the gray air went her lantern, saying:

"All is well! All is well!"

Azalea actually laughed aloud to think of Carin, all in her Sunday best, stealing out of that stately drawing-room and creeping up the

stairs to the huge cupola and standing there on the roof in the wind and night, waving her lantern. What fun it was to know a girl like that—a girl who wasn't afraid to do things, if she *was* rich and beautiful. There was some "go" in Carin, no doubt about it, though she did look so delicate and alabasterish. Azalea loved to invent words, and she invented "alabasterish" on the moment.

But what did that mean? Annie Laurie's lantern, full and strong and like a star, had shone through the light mist and was being waved frantically up and down. Mercy! how it waved.

"All is wrong! All is wrong!" it protested.

What could that mean? Carin, of course, would know in a few minutes. She would telephone. But Azalea had no telephone and she would not be allowed to ride to the valley at night.

"All is wrong—oh, very, very, wrong!" the lantern kept on saying.

What could she do to let Annie Laurie know that she understood? Poor Annie Laurie, who was brave about everything! It was a real trouble, Azalea felt sure. Had one of the aunts fallen and broken a bone? Could Mr. Pace be



Back and forth went her lantern, saying:
"All is well! All is well!"

ill? Were the cattle poisoned? Azalea took her lantern and twisted it around and around until it must have looked to Annie Laurie like a snare of fireflies. Then Carin, understanding, did the same thing. After that it was dark on Carin's roof; then Annie Laurie's lantern disappeared too. They had gone to the telephone, Azalea inferred.

She stamped back through the dew, hot with impatience. "I shan't sleep a wink to-night," she declared.

She undressed in anguish of soul, sank on her knees and sent up a fervent prayer for her friend, and then throwing herself on what she expected and desired to be a sleepless bed, fell fast asleep.

Yet in her sleep she had many dreams, and in each of them Annie Laurie appeared, always in some horrid plight. Now wolves were chasing her; now she had fallen over the cataract; now the horses were running away with her; now she was speeding down the road again, away from the scorn of her schoolmates, and little drops of blood were falling on the road from her shattered heart.

But none of these things were anywhere near

the truth, though nothing could be more terrible to Annie Laurie than what actually had happened.

It had come about after church. Dinner was over; the house had been tidied, and the two aunts and Mr. Pace and Annie Laurie sat in the sitting room before a fine fire. The aunts had taken out their pious books and were reading them. Mr. Pace was engaged in plodding sleepily through somebody's account of the "Thirty Year's War." As for Annie, she was supposed to be writing to a friend, but as a matter of fact she was scribbling some verses which she meant to show to the girls the next day. Nibbling the end of one's pen is more or less of a necessity when one is writing verses, and Annie Laurie, having got as far as that—and not much farther—was sampling the fine inky flavor of hers, and so chanced to look up and to let her glance fall on her father.

At first she was only conscious that his expression was not quite familiar to her. Then—well, then suddenly and terribly, she saw that he was indeed changed—that something frightful had happened to him. She sprang toward him, calling his name.

"Father—father!"

But no answer came.

The aunts came running, terror in their faces.

"Paralysis," said Miss Adnah. "Zillah, call the doctor. Azalea, help me lay him down—yes, on the floor. Open the window. Go get his bed ready, Zillah, after you've got the doctor. We and the doctor between us must get him in bed."

Annie Laurie did all she was told. She couldn't realize what had happened. Something seemed to be whirling around and around in her brain, and all it said was:

"Isn't Aunt Adnah wonderful? Isn't Aunt Adnah wonderful?"

She was indeed a general in times of trouble. Why, once when she was young—but there isn't time to tell Aunt Adnah's story now.

There was time for nothing, it seemed. It had come like a lightning-flash. Even the doctor was unable to aid. Simeon Pace lay in his bed, looking at them with tortured eyes. It seemed to Annie Laurie that he was trying to make her understand something—with all his vanishing power he was trying to give her some important piece of information. She put her ear to his

lips; she listened with the very ears of her soul; but the thing he wished her to know went into silence with him. A dread convulsion brought the end.

Annie Laurie, standing aghast, knew she was fatherless as well as motherless. Yet it couldn't be! Why, only a little while before everything had been well. Had been well! That reminded her of the signal they were to send—the signal that was to remind each member of the Girl's Triple Alliance that they had not forgotten each other. And they had agreed not to send the "bad" message unless something very terrible happened. They had laughed about it! And now the terrible thing really had happened. Or had it? Was it, perhaps, only a frightful dream? But no, it was true—and her heart ached so! If only the girls knew! Well, she would tell them. She sat near the clock, watching it. Perhaps when she let the girls know, her throat wouldn't ache so with that new, strange, crushing pain. Perhaps her eyeballs would cease burning. How busy it seemed around the house! People were coming and going. They stopped to speak to her, and she found herself saying mechanically:

"Yes, I know. You are very kind. To-morrow I'll understand better. Thank you—to-morrow."

Out of sheer compassion they left her alone.

Seven o'clock. It was time for the signal. She found the lantern and made her way, unseen, to the roof. Azalea's light shone at her from the gray air, far, far up the ridge. Carin's light flashed from the roof of the mansion. All was well with them. They were laughing—Annie Laurie knew they were laughing. And she—she waved her lantern up and down and up and down with a kind of passion. She must make them know how deep was the sorrow that had befallen her. And they seemed to know. It was as if she could feel the streams of their sympathy rolling toward her. Yes, they understood. That queer fluttering of their lanterns assured her of it. Annie Laurie left her roof and descending into the attic, sank on an old settle there. She dragged a horse blanket over her and at last the storm of her anguish broke, and she wept and wept.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY

Was it a long time—weary hours and hours—before Annie Laurie found her way down the stairs? She never could be sure. A man, whom she did not at first recognize, was leaving her father's room. For a second she felt like rushing at him to tell him that he, a stranger, should not be in there—in that sacred chamber where her father lay dead and defenseless. Then she saw that it was Mr. Disbrow, the undertaker, and realized what his task had been. He had been making her father ready for his last resting place.

But surely the man was not ashamed of his task! He shot one glance at Annie Laurie, and then without speaking, hastened down the stairs and out of the front door. Was he sorry for her and at a loss to say how sorry, and so had run away? Annie Laurie could understand that. She would have felt much the same way herself. Yet it was, she decided, an odd way for a man to

feel who was so often in the house of mourning as an undertaker naturally would be. However, it mattered little. She was glad he hadn't spoken to her. And yet, when she thought of him as Sam's father, it was curious that he hadn't. Of course it might be that he knew nothing of the good friendship which existed between Sam and herself, and he might not approve of it anyway. The Disbrows were great for keeping to themselves. So were the Paces, but the Paces were busy folk; they liked their neighbors even if they didn't see much of them. But one always had the feeling that the Disbrows shut themselves away from society because they had something against it—nobody quite knew what. Only Sam—Sam was different. He was made to live in the world and to enjoy it.

A vision of him, wide-shouldered, brown-haired—his hair would have curled a trifle if he had not continually discouraged it—brown-eyed, smiling, frank, energetic, arose before Annie Laurie. He had a ringing laugh, and the neighbors said he dared to laugh even in that silent shut-up house where his mother lay on her sofa, with mouse-like, cross-eyed Hannah watching beside her. It came over Annie Laurie that

she had disliked them for things that were none of their fault. Mrs. Disbrow couldn't help being ill; Hannah couldn't help being cross-eyed; and it was beautiful of her to be always beside her mother.

Yet, as she paced the floor of her bedroom thinking about her father, with her tortured thoughts leaping this way and that as if they were struggling to escape from sorrow, a conviction came over her that sickness often was the fault of the person who suffered from it. She knew that an atmosphere of gloom hung over Sam's house; that if he opened up the windows Hannah was told to close them; if he brought in flowers they had to be thrown out because they gave his mother a cold; if he built a fire in the fireplace for cheerfulness, it was considered unsafe, owing to a defect in the chimney. The stove was sufficient—and indeed more than sufficient, since the temperature of the room was at least eighty the winter through. Poor Sam! Annie Laurie knew that he had suggested that the chimney be mended so that they might sometimes sit by the open fire, letting the raging stove subside; he had urged Hannah to have an operation that would set her eyes straight,

but the family had been too fearful of the results. So they sat in gloom and hideousness within their power to remedy. At least that was how it looked to Sam's impatient, energetic nature, and Annie Laurie took the same view.

Miss Zillah came in after a time, with arms and words of comfort for her girl.

"Carin called up about seven o'clock," she said, after a time when Annie Laurie had wept out her grief on her good aunt's shoulder. "She seemed to know you were in trouble, though I don't understand how she could have found out."

Annie Laurie told her of the signalling.

"Well, she wanted to come right over to you, but I told her to wait until to-morrow. Was I right?"

Annie Laurie nodded.

"Get undressed now, poor one," soothed Aunt Zillah. "See, I'll open your bed and warm it for you. Put on this flannel nightgown, that's a dear. And I'll bring you a glass of milk—unless you want something heartier."

It was wonderful, being petted like this. She had led a chilly life, had Annie Laurie. She had known kindness, but not, it must be confessed, warm love. Yet now Aunt Zillah's com-

passion and affection wrapped her about like a cloak. How did the old song run?

"Come under my plaidie, the night's gaun to
fa';

Come in frae the cauld blast, the drift and the
snaw;

Come under my plaidie and sit down beside me,
There's room in't, dear lassie, believe me, for
twa."

Yes, she would get in under Aunt Zillah's plaidie and she would let the dear old lady know that she was grateful to her for having asked her. So, when she had drunk the warm fresh milk and been tucked in her bed, she put her arms around Aunt Zillah's wrinkled neck and gave her a long, long hug.

"We'll never, never go back on each other, will we?" she whispered tremulously.

"Never, lass, never," responded the old lady, the tears dripping from her eyes on Annie Laurie's upturned face. So, sweetened by a sorrow, which was after all but a natural and right sorrow such as must come to all, Annie Laurie sank into the dead sleep of grief.

The next few days were blurred and strange. Friends came to the house. Flowers arrived in

boxes. There were many telephone messages. The aunts were called up from the telegraph office. There was business to do at the cemetery; arrangements to make at the church. Through it all, Annie Laurie strove to do her part. There would be time enough for grieving afterward, she decided. The thing now was not to let too heavy a burden fall on her aunts, who were, as Annie Laurie seemed to discover for the first time, really getting to be old ladies.

But at last it all was over. The house was quiet and peaceful. And the help on the farm came to Miss Adnah for instructions.

It must have been three days after the funeral that Mr. Carson called one afternoon and asked to see Annie Laurie and her aunts. It was like him, in his thoughtfulness to include her, Annie Laurie thought. She did not know that Charles Carson, who liked almost everybody and who had the best will in the world toward all mankind, nevertheless, knowing as much of human nature as he did, thought it best to take her at once into council concerning matters that would affect her future life.

He was received in the stiff little parlor, the two sisters sitting opposite him in prim dignity,

and Annie Laurie instinctively putting her chair near his.

"I am sure you will pardon me for speaking to you concerning your affairs," he said in his hearty way. "I would not venture to do so uninvited, were it not a matter that in a way concerns me also."

"Yes, sir," said Miss Adnah and Miss Zillah in unison. Annie Laurie fixed her reddish-brown eyes upon him with devotion, and said nothing.

"The day before Mr. Pace died," he went on, "I paid him twenty thousand dollars in cash."

Annie Laurie stared; the sisters started.

"It seemed to me foolish enough to pass such a sum of money over in simple currency, but as you probably know, your brother"—he was now addressing himself to the elder ladies—"had a prejudice against banks. I wished to give him my check. He said he had no use for checks. He wanted money. It was a curious idiosyncrasy of his, but since he wished it that way I humored him. He put the roll of bills into his pocket—I paid the money to him at Mr. Heller's bank—and drove away with it. That was Saturday afternoon. He died Sunday. I have

come to inquire—with only neighborly motives, I beg you to believe—whether or not you have seen anything of that roll of bills.”

There was a slight pause. Then:

“I have seen nothing of it, sir,” said Miss Adnah.

“Nor I, sir,” added Miss Zillah.

“Oh, and there must have been more money,” broke in Annie Laurie, “much, much more! I know papa always had a lot, Mr. Carson, but I haven’t an idea where he kept it. None of us had. If we ever asked him for money he would go away for a time and presently come back with the bills he meant to give us. He had some place where he hid it, and I used to think he ought to tell some one of us where it was.”

“I should think so, indeed,” said Mr. Carson rather heatedly. “Then you haven’t any of you a notion where he kept his funds?”

“Not an earthly idea!” cried Annie Laurie.

“We haven’t the faintest notion, sir,” said Miss Adnah. “I will confess now that sister and I got up in the night—last night it was—and looked everywhere in his room. We even lifted the edges of the carpet and took the back off the steel engravings. We looked, of course, in the

bureau, and the chest and the closet. We found nothing. It was our intention to begin to-night searching in the other rooms of the house."

"But why in the night, ladies?"

Miss Adnah looked rather offended, as if Mr. Carson had gone a little too far in asking such questions. But Miss Zillah broke out with:

"Oh, you see, sir, it seemed so silly and absurd for us to have to do a thing like that. My opinion is that brother Simeon should have kept up with the times and used a bank like other men. I hate to have the neighbors know what trouble and embarrassment he has put us to."

Miss Adnah looked at her sister in amazement. She, who was so gentle of judgment and of speech, was actually criticising a Pace—and her own dead brother at that! But Mr. Carson turned a look of appreciation on the flushed little face of the old lady.

"The Paces are not all cranks, anyway," was his thought. "This Miss Zillah seems a very sensible sort of a woman—quite fit to be related to Annie Laurie."

The reflection would have surprised Miss Adnah very much had she known of it, for she regarded herself as a person of singular good

sense. Indeed, she secretly thought that she had, so far as the Paces were concerned, rather a monopoly of it. Zillah she regarded as something of a dreamer, too sentimental, or "soft," as she put it, by half; and she felt very disapproving when she heard her pass uncomplimentary judgment upon one of the family. That was a privilege which Miss Adnah reserved for herself.

"You see, sir," Miss Zillah went on, blurting out a family secret which Miss Adnah would have starved rather than let anyone know, "we haven't a cent in the world. The small amount which my sister and I had in our purses has been used up during the last few days. We owe for all the expenses of our brother's funeral. Really, I may say that we don't know which way to turn."

"My dear Miss Zillah," responded Mr. Carson, "I will place a sum of money at your disposal immediately."

Why, Miss Adnah wondered, did he turn to Zillah instead of to her? It seemed to her that it ought to be evident to anyone that she was now the head of the house.

"Moreover," Mr. Carson went on, "I will de-

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posit the sum in the bank and send you the bank book. I know this will be more in accord with your ideas."

There was a little twinkle in his eye as he said this, but Miss Zillah did not catch it. She was really much flattered that he should think her a person capable of conducting things in a businesslike way, and she would not have shown by the flutter of an eyelash how frightened she really was at the suggestion.

"Then," continued Mr. Carson, "our next business will be to find that money. I propose that you call in one or two trusty neighbors, not given to gossiping, and that they assist you in looking over the premises. The money must be here somewhere. It merely devolves on us to find it."

Miss Adnah made a gesture of distress.

"I don't believe, sir," she said, "that you can have any notion of how intensely distressing it is to us to do such a thing. And I may say that we have no neighbors who wouldn't gossip. If you have any such, please show them to me."

Annie Laurie, who knew her Aunt Adnah's tempestuous nature, saw that a storm was rising, and she cast about for a way of diverting it.

"Aunt Adnah," she broke in, "let Azalea and Carin help us hunt. You know if it's a secret they'll never, never, tell it. We've pledged ourselves to keep each other's secrets, you see. And no one can look as hard as we girls can. We're like ferrets."

"An excellent idea, Miss Pace," said Mr. Carson, nodding at Aunt Adnah. "Let the members of the Triple Alliance have a hand at it. It will seem natural enough for Annie Laurie's friends to be here with her in her trouble; the girls will tell nothing; and their keen young wits are the best ones imaginable to set at this task."

Upon consultation it struck the sisters that this would be the case. Bad as it would be to have three "young-ones" ranging over their orderly house, tearing up this and that, they would at least take the thing only as a sort of game. They wouldn't be ill-natured and sneering about it as their elders might be.

So it was agreed that they would accept Mr. Carson's offer of a generous loan of money, and that on Saturday the three girls were to start in under the direction of the Misses Pace, and make a search of both house and yard.

"Their eyes certainly are sharper than ours, Adnah," Miss Zillah said.

"Yes," snapped Miss Adnah, worn and weary with the difficulties of life, "they're sharp enough. Oh, Zillah, Zillah, why should we Paces be humiliated like this?"

"No humiliation about it, sister," Miss Zillah replied. "Take things a little easier, Adnah; let some one help us out. We're very much shaken—very much shaken, indeed. We're getting old, and we've had a great sorrow. If folks want to help, why let 'em."

There was no doubt about it, they *were* shaken. The excitement and courage that had borne them up at first, failed them as the week went on. Miss Adnah, who had felt herself so able to attend to the business of the farm, not only found it beyond her power to give an order, but she found it impossible to fix her mind on the book-keeping, which was a necessary part of the business. Annie Laurie had been obliged to consult with the help after her school hours, and to straighten out the accounts as best she could during the evening. They felt the need of a strong, quiet man of affairs—a good, reliable overseer—but the men who were helping them were not

of that sort, and they knew of no one in the country who seemed to meet their need.

Saturday morning by nine o'clock, according to Annie Laurie's invitation, Azalea and Carin arrived on their ponies. These being given to the stable men, the two girls, in no little awe at entering a house of sorrow, came in to pay their respects to Miss Zillah and her sister. The two sat shivering before the fire, tearful and nervous, and even Miss Adnah was now willing to give over the search for their lost fortune into the hands of these respectful and sympathetic girls.

"At first, my dear girls," said Aunt Zillah brokenly, "it seemed as if we couldn't let anyone in to help us and it's hard enough now, but we'd rather it would be you than anyone."

"Oh, Miss Zillah," cried Azalea in her impulsive way, "we understand just how you feel. But Annie Laurie's fortune just must be found, mustn't it? Why, it's a quest, you know. A sacred quest—like you read about."

That glow which was Azalea's greatest charm, lit up her dark face and Miss Zillah felt that here was a girl who was one of them. She need fear nothing from her. As for that sweet-faced Carson girl, with her golden hair and her

lovely voice, how could anyone do anything but trust her? Yes, it was all as it should be. They were old women and must give their cares into the hands of others.

So the three girls began their never-to-be-forgotten search for Annie Laurie's lost fortune.

Although the aunts had gone over the dead man's room, they thought best to begin there. So thorough was their search that they even ripped open the lining of his coats; they looked in his shoes; they investigated his hat linings. Nothing was found.

Then they searched the hallways, the pantries and cupboards. They looked throughout the parlor, through the living room, through the kitchen. They had one of the men in to pull up the window sills. They took the bricks from the hearth. Nightfall found them wearily searching the dusty debris in the old attic.

Sunday was a day of rest for all of these people, but it was very, very hard for them to sit in idleness while their imaginations were rioting through the Pace property, searching out every corner and cubbyhole for the lost money. Naturally enough, Monday found the girls in no condition to settle down to their studies, and as

Mrs. Carson said, it was so much more important that the money should be found than that they should learn a lesson or two, that they were excused from school and permitted to resume their search.

The yard was their point of attack this morning. They looked over every inch of it, but nowhere did they see anything save the hard, frozen surface. No hollow tree offered a place for hiding. The solid substructure of the house forbade them to hope for anything there. Next they went to the barns, the stables and out-houses, but here the prospect was discouraging indeed.

"Besides," said Annie Laurie, "when papa wanted to get money for any purpose he always went to his own room and locked the door. It seemed as if he must have kept it with him."

"But how can that be," argued Carin, dropping white and worn into her chair—they were in Annie Laurie's room,—"when nothing has been found anywhere about his clothes? Why, the only pocketbook he appeared to have was that little one for silver. Didn't you ever see him with a large leather pocketbook, Annie?"

"Never," said Annie Laurie. "Never."

"But now, when papa paid him that twenty thousand dollars," Carin insisted. "Do you suppose he brought that home in his hand the way a child would a penny, or rolled it up in his pocket where it could fall out any minute? It doesn't seem reasonable; honestly it doesn't."

And then, suddenly, Azalea had a vision. She saw a man come into a dark room—a room lighted only by a flickering fire. She saw him lay aside his coat, unscrew his tin arm, take something from the mantel shelf, place it within, then replace the arm and the coat. She remembered how he had asked her if she ever dreamed, and how she had said she never told her dreams, and he had said that was right. And she had remembered the look that had gone from him to her and back again—a look which was a promise on her part not to tell what she had seen and a message from him of confidence in her. She sat rigid, going over the scene again before she spoke. When she did the girls hardly recognized her voice.

"I know!" she said—not very loud.

"You know?" The others cried it together.

"He kept his money in his tin arm."

"No!"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him put some there once."

"When?"

"Where?"

"The night Annie Laurie and I fell asleep on the sofa."

"Tell me more, 'Zalie."

"Yes, yes, I will. I'll tell you everything. Oh, Annie Laurie, was the tin arm buried with him?"

"No—no, I'm sure it wasn't. It was hanging on a nail in his bedroom the day after he was buried, but the aunts couldn't bear to see it there and they carried it to the attic."

"Then the money couldn't have been in it after all."

"Oh, it might still be there. Let's go see."

Up to the attic they went, trembling with eagerness. There, sure enough, from a beam hung the tin arm. Annie Laurie could not quite bring herself to touch it. It seemed almost like a part of her father. But Azalea took it down, convinced that she was right. She looked into it; carried it to one of the windows and looked

again. She ran her fingers into the hand of it.

She turned her disappointed face toward her friends. There was nothing there.

"All the same," she said with earnestness, "it *was* there."

"But then some one has taken it out."

"That's it," said Carin. "Some one has taken it out."

"Not the aunts!" cried Annie Laurie, fiercely.

"Oh, mercy no," agreed Azalea, "not the aunts."

"But who else handled the arm?" asked Carin.

Annie Laurie stood thinking. Then a deep flush spread over her face.

"I—I don't—who else could have?" she stammered. She couldn't bear to place anyone under suspicion.

But Azalea was more impulsive.

"Why Mr. Disbrow, the undertaker, of course," she said. "He must have taken it off. He must have—" she stopped and the three stared at each other.

And then Annie Laurie remembered how he had crowded by her in the hall, not speaking, and looking the other way.

CHAPTER IX

THE DISBROWS

The three girls made up their minds to tell no one of their suspicions concerning the disappearance of Simeon Pace's money. But Azalea could not but talk it over with Pa McBirney, and Thomas McBirney could not resist cogitating about the matter with Haystack Thompson, and he, in turn, was impelled to go with it to his trusted pastor, Absalom Summers. And Absalom whispered it to his Barbara, and Barbara—but perhaps she told no one. In looking the matter over afterward, she was almost sure that she had told no one. At least she hadn't told of it right out. And Carin spoke of it only to her father; and he mentioned it merely to the banker Heller, and he only spoke of it to his fellow officers in the bank, and they told no one but their intimate friends.

As for Annie Laurie, she refrained with a mighty effort from confiding her suspicions to her aunts, and she warned her friends not to tell

them. Had they mulled that matter over and over during the long, lonely winter evenings, the poor girl would have felt as if she were losing her reason as well as her fortune. Indeed, the winter had settled down heavily over the Pace household. The dairy met with reverses. Two of the best cows died. The accounts would not balance. And worst of all, the helpers were hard to manage and would not take orders willingly from Miss Adnah. The strong will and hand of Simeon Pace were sorely missed.

And along with all this distress was the sense that Annie Laurie and her aunts had of burning injustice. Somewhere in the world was money in abundance, belonging to them. Just how much it was they could not even guess. Of Mr. Carson's purchase money of twenty thousand dollars they felt sure. He had Simeon Pace's receipt to show for that. But there was other money beyond question—the savings of years. The old aunts, waking in the night, would arise and fumble in the places in which they had looked so often; and Annie Laurie, strong and sensible as she was, found that it required all of her will to keep from following their example.

This girl, so straightforward, so energetic and hopeful by nature, found it almost intolerable to sit around, patient under injustice. She proposed to Mr. Carson that he should go to Hector Disbrow and accuse him of the theft of the money—tell him the whole thing was known, and that he must refund it or be arrested. But Mr. Carson shook his head.

“As a matter of fact, my dear,” he said, “the thing isn’t known at all. It is only surmised. Azalea, in semi-darkness, thought she saw your father put something in his arm. She may have been mistaken. Or even if she were not mistaken about his doing so on that particular occasion, it doesn’t in the least follow that your father carried the money in question there. Above all, it does not follow that it was in the arm the day of his death; or that, even if it was there, that the undertaker stole it. The tin arm must have hung in the room for days. Many persons visited that room. Any one of them might be guilty.”

“Then is there nothing at all that can be done, sir?”

“Nothing at present. I am watching Disbrow—indeed, I may say the whole community has

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him under suspicion. If he is guilty be sure that sooner or later it will come out."

"But here we are, getting deeper and deeper in debt to you!"

"Annie Laurie, I am convinced that every cent I have advanced you will be paid back to me in time. You are a brave girl. I trust you completely. I feel that you are going to make a success of life. Meantime, you are living on borrowed capital. But so are thousands of others. Back of it all, you must remember, is the fine farm as security. It is a perfectly clear business proposition. Have no fears, child."

She strengthened under the tone he used in speaking to her. If he had pitied her, she would have broken down, but he merely put it to her that she was playing her part in the world, and she braced herself to play that part well and not disappoint him or any of her other friends.

She tried to avoid Sam Disbrow, yet it seemed to be her luck to meet him oftener than usual. He was very sorry for her, she could see, and he assumed his brightest and heartiest manner when he was with her, in his efforts to help her to be happy.

One day when there was a feeling of spring

in the air, and she had gone along one of the little winding paths through the pine wood, she met him with his gun on his shoulder and his dogs at his heels.

"Why, Annie Laurie," he cried, "are you out hunting too?"

The deep suspicion and anger she felt toward his father put some irritation into her tone as she said:

"And why are you hunting, Sam? I thought you were working in the box factory office."

"Well, so I was. You see, I had finished school here and dad couldn't afford to send me away. I might have gone anyway, and somehow worked my way through Rutherford Academy, but Hannah said I oughtn't to leave mother. So I stayed—though it didn't seem to me quite the best thing to do. But now, suddenly, dad says I'm to go away to school. At first I refused. I was afraid it would mean pinching and scrimping for all the rest of them at home. But dad said, no, things were a little easier with him now, and I'd better take the chance while I had it."

Annie Laurie stood before him in the path staring, while Sam waited in vain for her congratulations.

"So, yesterday," he went on in a somewhat dashed tone, "a fellow came to the factory looking for work. He said he needed it very badly—had his mother to look after. So I spoke up and said I was leaving to go into the Rutherford Academy at the spring term, and that I'd get out and let him have my place. You see, there were a number of things I wanted to do around home before I went away. And I was just crazy to get off in the hills for a day or two. That's the way with us down here, isn't it, Annie Laurie? We can keep under roof only about so long. Then we have to go roving for a spell."

Annie Laurie hardly heard what he said. She could with difficulty keep from breaking out with:

"But where is the money coming from that is to send you away to the academy? Didn't you ask your father how he came by this money so suddenly? Have you no notion of what he has done to earn this money? Can *you* be living a lie—just as he is?"

There swept back to her memory the words the minister had said that day in church when she had caught Sam's eye, and had known what he was thinking.

"Plant a lie in the garden of your soul," he had said, "and it will flourish worse than any poisonous weed. Do not think you can uproot it when you will, for it will grow and grow till it is stronger than you, and not all your prayers and tears can rend its terrible roots out of your life."

Sam had wondered, as she had, why the preacher should have talked like that to a congregation of good people. For they had all seemed good to her; but now she realized that if the Disbrows were living a lie perhaps other persons whom she knew and liked were doing so, too. For the first time in Annie Laurie's life a tidal wave of suspicion, distrust and hatred of the world swept over her, and it seemed like a wicked place—a place made up of beings who tried to injure each other.

She felt so ill that she leaned against a tree.

Sam seemed to take no notice, however. He was watching his dogs, and talking on and on in his cheerful way.

"And another fine thing is going to happen," he said. "Dad has got up spunk enough at last to send Hannah up to Williamsburg to have her eyes operated upon, and sis has found the courage

to go. Do you know, I believe that after she gets those poor eyes of hers straightened she won't be so shy and queer as she is now. I suppose she loathes going out where she'll meet people, when she has to look all over the premises whenever she tries to fix her eyes on the person she's talking to. Then, if dad could only get some one in to take care of poor mother, Hannah could go away to school too, perhaps, and grow to be a little more like other folks."

Annie Laurie knew that Sam would not have talked about his own people in this free way to anyone but her. The two had spoken out their minds to each other for years, and it had come to be second nature for them to do it.

And now here they were with a black secret between them. She, Annie Laurie, who had meant always to be Sam's true friend, was suspicious of him! Yet she could not look at him, standing there smiling in the spring sunlight, his eyes full of enthusiasm, and think him guilty of any knowledge of wrong-doing on the part of his father.

How very, very strange life seemed! Once she had thought it like a road. One had only to walk ahead, doing right and nodding to the

passers-by, and all would be well. Now she saw how it twisted, turned, and split—this road—and how difficult it was to tell which turning to take, or which by-path to seek.

Then an impulse came over her almost as strong and swift as one of those which were forever besetting Azalea.

"Sam," she said, "I haven't been in your house for years. Do you know, I would like to go. I'd like to go now. Do you think I might?"

Sam flushed a little and hesitated a moment.

"Why, yes, Annie, I don't know why you shouldn't. Mother doesn't see many people, as you know; and they won't be expecting you, but if you'll take things as you find them—"

"Oh, yes, Sam," she said dryly. "That's just what I mean. I want to take them as they are. I want to get acquainted with your family."

He looked pleased and softened at that.

"Do you, Annie Laurie?" he said with a little thrill in his voice. "Well, that sure is nice of you. Not very many of the neighbors seem to care whether they live or die. Come along, then. Let's go now."

So they turned in the direction of the Disbrow house, Annie Laurie leading and Sam walking

behind, nervously smiling, the dogs at his heels.

They turned in at the Disbrow place, passing through the sagging gate, and Sam uttered his first apology.

"I've tried and tried to get that old gate to stay up on the level," he said. "But seems like we never have the proper tools to do anything with; and anyhow, the wood's so rotten it won't hold a nail, hardly."

"Oh, a sagging gate is nothing," answered Annie Laurie dully.

The little garden had not yet felt the influence of spring, and it looked dejected enough. Fragments of last year's mosquito netting dangled at the windows; the paint of the little house was weather-worn; the arms were off the bench on the porch. Green shades kept the light from making its way into the low rooms. Indeed, so dim was the room into which Annie Laurie stepped that at first she could see nothing. The heat was fairly sweltering, and the atmosphere was lifeless and stale-smelling.

"Mother," said Sam gently, "I've brought a friend to see you—Annie Laurie Pace."

"Oh," sighed a voice from the gloom, struggling between reproachfulness and natural

politeness, "have you? How do you do, Annie Laurie?"

"I'm very well, thank, you ma'am. Are you feeling any better?"

"No—no, I don't seem to get any better. Sam, you'll have to pull up a shade. Annie Laurie won't be able to see a thing."

Annie Laurie closed her eyes for an instant. She dreaded what she would see, and yet she had long wished to know the truth—to know what Sam's strange home was like. She heard the shade being raised, and with something of an effort she opened her eyes and looked about. What she saw gave her a shock. Her own home was ugly enough, as she knew well; but poverty was here, and worse than poverty—indifference to appearances. The almost bare apartment wore that dejected and unhappy aspect of a room for which no one cares and in which no one hopes. It was a sad room—a sick room—with a long couch and its occupant for the chief objects.

Yes, the couch was long and wide, though the woman who lay on it was so small. Figured brown calico covered the bed, and the woman was dressed in a wrapper of faded blue. There

was no collar about her throat—only the coarse open neck-band, showing a shriveled neck. Her face was bloodless and bleached like a vegetable that has grown in the dark, and out of it looked a pair of weary eyes, beneath which were deep, dark circles. Her hair—brown, touched with gray—was brushed back straight and flat from her bulging brow, and this, with her high-arched eyebrows, gave her an almost Chinese look. Her hands, thinner and more apathetic than any hands Annie Laurie ever had seen, lay on the calico cover.

“It’s not very often I have light let in here,” she said. “It makes my head ache so.”

Annie Laurie did not say that she ought not to have let it in for her, if that was the case. She couldn’t really feel that this was the case. She was glad the light was in the room for once, and by it, she moved toward Mrs. Disbrow’s bed, her hand outstretched with something almost like satisfaction, for she knew as she looked in that woman’s face, that if her fortune had been stolen from her by the undertaker, his wife did not know it. She was as convinced of this woman’s innocence when she looked at her, as she was of her pitiful condition. So she took one of the

claw-like hands in her own strong grasp and sat down beside her. Mrs. Disbrow's face was quivering with the excitement of meeting a stranger.

"Sam often talks of you," said his mother in her fluttering voice. "I've been wanting to see you. You're a strong, fine girl, Annie."

"Yes, I'm strong and well," the girl answered. "I'm very thankful."

"Well, I haven't known a well day for years," said the invalid. "Here I lie, racked with pain, and I declare I don't know whether it's one day or another."

Annie Laurie felt herself bracing against this discouraged tone.

"Well," she said, "I don't suppose you really have to worry about what day it is. You have nothing to do—no Monday washing to think of, or Saturday baking. Some one else does all that for you."

She spoke merely to present a cheerful side, but Mrs. Disbrow flushed a trifle. Annie Laurie saw that she had said something that annoyed her.

"Yes," the sick woman replied still more dejectedly, "I'm nothing but a drag on my family."

I often say to them that it would be better if I was out of their way."

"I don't suppose that makes them very happy—hearing you say that." Annie Laurie replied in her hearty way. It really seemed to her as if that was the unkindest thing a mother could say to her children. "If only I could have my mother, sick or well, or any way at all, I'd be the happiest girl in the world. It's terribly lonely being without a mother—or a father," she added almost in a whisper.

Mrs. Disbrow reached out her hand and laid it on Annie Laurie's.

"Poor girl," she murmured with what was almost her first thought of anyone save herself, that winter.

"And—Oh, I feel so sorry for Sam and Hannah, with you ill always," went on Annie Laurie. "Of course it spoils their happiness. It seems such a pity! Isn't there anything that can be done, Mrs. Disbrow? Doesn't any doctor know how to cure you? Haven't you any idea yourself of what ought to be done?"

"Well, my husband talks of going West soon," answered Mrs. Disbrow with something like vivacity—or rather, like a shadow of it. "I'm

looking forward to that. If we could get to a new place and to a new house, and if there was something to look forward to, and hope for the children to make something of themselves, I don't know—maybe—" her voice trailed off and her eyes fixed themselves in an aimless reverie on the opposite wall.

So they were going West! That was the plan. The man who had been unable to give his family a chance, who had been broken by this long illness of his wife's, who had failed to make his place among men, was going West. His chance had come to him at last. Had it come through theft? Annie Laurie found herself wishing that they might indeed have the chance, these poor people who seemed never to have been able to step out into the sunshine. Yet had they a right to this chance—if it meant her defeat? Could she let them go this way, while she was left to struggle with poverty?

The door opened and a girl entered. Hannah! She was so slender that Annie Laurie, who was broad of shoulder, with a backbone that might have been made of steel, wondered how the poor thing managed to keep upright. Her face was ivory-colored, her frock an ill-fitting

gingham of a hideous "watermelon" pink. She turned her dreadfully crossed eyes on Annie Laurie—or to be correct, turned one of them on her—and looked at her resentfully.

"This is sister Hannah, Annie Laurie," said Sam in rather a stifled voice. "You two girls ought to know each other, you know."

"How do you do?" said Hannah, miserable with shyness.

"Oh, I'm pretty well, thank you, Hannah," Annie Laurie answered, and then she added: "But I can't say I'm very happy. You wouldn't expect that. I'm very, very lonely without my father."

She had risen and stood before the girl, with her bald little statement of sorrow, and Hannah, forgetting herself and her fears for a moment, looked up at Annie Laurie with sympathy in her face.

"Oh," she said, "it's too bad. I—I cried after I heard of it."

She seemed astonished at herself for saying so much, and Sam looked at her with amazement. Had Hannah actually cried over some one else's troubles?

"Did you?" exclaimed Annie Laurie. "Oh, that was sweet of you, Hannah."

She forgot her Aunt Adnah's axiom that the Paces seldom kissed, and leaned forward and planted a warm kiss on Hannah's cheek.

"I like to know that," she went on. "You see I feel so—so friendless."

"Why, with your aunts and all?" inquired Mrs. Disbrow.

"I feel as if I ought to be protecting my aunts, you see," explained Annie. "They are old and terribly broken by father's death. And then, everything has gone so wrong with us. We haven't been able to find father's money anywhere, you know, and we're really poor. We've no money to run the dairy on, and the men need overseeing, and I've blundered along with my bad bookkeeping. Altogether, it looks as if things were going to ruin, and I just can't bear that, Mrs. Disbrow."

"Why, you've always been so prosperous!" exclaimed Mrs. Disbrow. "My husband often has spoken of how prosperous your father was, and has contrasted him with himself. You see, Mr. Disbrow never has got on well here. His farm has paid poorly, and of course

the undertaking business is of very little consequence in a community like this. I declare I can't blame him for being discouraged and bitter and sort of half-hating the men who are successful. It's hard to like people when everything is going against you."

Annie Laurie swept her glance around the room again, taking in the brother and sister, and resting it at last on the sick woman.

"I suppose it is," she said slowly. "I suppose it is. But Mrs. McBirney says you have to give out liking to have people like you, and that you have to think you are going to succeed in order to do it."

"And you have to think well in order to be well, I suppose," said the invalid angrily. "I suppose that's her idea. Well, you can tell her for me that she's mistaken."

Annie Laurie did not look rebuked. She sat still, thinking.

"I know so little about sickness," she said slowly. "that I can't even sympathize the way I ought to, I suppose. Oh, Mrs. Disbrow, don't you suppose you could go riding with me? I'm such a good driver, I wouldn't let you be shaken

up at all. Sam and Hannah could sit beside you to keep you from being joggled."

"A pretty sight I'd make!" cried Mrs. Disbrow. "There's too many of the neighbors would be peeking out to see what I looked like, after all these years of being shut away. No, thank you, child, I don't believe I want to try."

"But you could go at twilight. We could go when the neighbors are at supper. Wouldn't it be fun, Sam? Could you sit up, ma'am?"

"No, I don't believe I could. And even if I did, like as not I'd pay for it the next day."

"But why not try? Maybe you wouldn't have to pay for it. Oh, ma'am, it's so wonderful to be out of doors. You can't think what you miss staying in here—can she, Sam?"

"No," said Sam, "she can't have an idea. Oh, mother, you never would listen to me, though truly I believe you'd be ever so much better if you would get out. Please try. The three of us will be able to take good care of you."

There was a moment's silence, and then the boy flung out his arms with sudden passion.

"Oh, mother, mother, please try! Why need we all be so unhappy? Why can't we have a little joy like other people?"

Annie Laurie felt the tears leap into her eyes. She had never before seen Sam as other than the cheerful, hearty boy, but now she knew that the cheerfulness and heartiness had been an imitation of the real thing. They had been but his courage masquerading as something else.

Mrs. Disbrow raised herself on her elbow and looked at her son. Suddenly a great light broke over her. She had not been the only sufferer in that house. Before her were the two whose youth she had shadowed with her pain.

"I'll go," she said in a strange voice. "When shall it be?"

"Now," cried Annie Laurie. "I'll run right home and have the men hitch up. Oh, Hannah, be sure she's dressed warm enough. I'll have something warm put in for her feet. Oh, Sam, maybe she'll like it!"

She turned toward the boy with outstretched hands and he caught and held them for a moment. Then she was off, running as fast as she could to serve the people into whose house she had gone with the motives of a spy.

CHAPTER X

SAM

Of course Annie Laurie told Azalea and Carin all about it as the three sat together the next day after luncheon, in the schoolroom.

"Papa said he'd seen you," Carin answered. "He was horseback riding and late getting home, and he said he saw you out with the Disbrows, and that Mrs. Disbrow looked like a ghost that had got back to earth and didn't like it very well. But he thought you were wonderful to do that. He didn't quite see how you could, feeling as you do, but he thought it lovely of you just the same."

"Well," said Annie Laurie. "You see I didn't feel quite the way I thought I did when I saw that poor woman and Hannah; and then poor Sam looked at me as if he thought I could set his world right if I only would."

"It's a terribly twisted world," mused Azalea. "Now, what if poor little Hannah has her eyes straightened, and Sam goes to college, and Mrs.

Disbrow gets her health out West all out of the money that was stolen from you, Annie Laurie? Those are all good things to have happen."

"Yes, they are," answered Annie Laurie without anger. "They are good things. But you remember what Elder Mills said that last night about avoiding lies in word and act. I remember particularly because it was something like what the preacher had been saying over to the Baptist church only a few Sundays before. It seemed to me they were all harping on that subject, but I begin to see why, now. I can see that all false things are lies—that stealing is a sort of lie—a saying that something is yours which isn't. It will be like that with the Disbrows, I suppose; no matter what good comes to them, it won't seem good—at least not to Mr. Disbrow, who knows the truth about how he came by the money. It's dreadful, when you come to think of it, that a nice boy like Sam should be having things out of that money he's no right to."

"You oughtn't to speak as if it was an absolutely sure thing that he took the money, Annie Laurie," warned Carin. "Papa says we mustn't do that. He says it's a kind of crime in itself

to accuse people of sins when you're not sure they're guilty."

"I'll try not to," sighed Annie Laurie penitently, "but it's very hard. And, oh, Carin, it's getting to be so sad at the house with the old aunts always talking about the lost money and hunting and hunting for it, and the business going to pieces and I not able to prevent it."

That night when the Carsons sat at dinner, Carin told her father that Annie Laurie had said Mrs. Disbrow was expecting her husband to take the family West.

Mr. Carson brought his fist down on the table.

"Now, that can't be," he cried. "I won't have that! I simply won't. No matter what risk I run of doing the man an injustice, I won't have him leave this community. He's under suspicion and he's got to stay here. I'm sorry for him, sometimes, when I see him walk into town and all the men turn their backs on him and walk away. Of course, it isn't really fair—or at least, it may not be fair, for it is possible that he is as innocent as you or I. But if he is guilty, he's getting only a small part of what he deserves. At any rate, I can understand that he's very uncomfortable in this town nowadays, and

that he'd like mighty well to get out of it. But he shan't, if I have anything to say about it."

The next morning, however, Annie Laurie came with startling news.

"They're gone!" she cried as she dashed into the schoolroom.

"Who?" the girls asked in unison.

"The Disbrows."

"No!"

"Yes, they have. I was walking along the road and I happened to look over toward their house, and there wasn't any smoke coming from the chimney. And there was something about the place—I can't describe it, because the curtains are forever down anyway—but something that looked deserted. So I pelted across the field and knocked at the door and no one answered. And then I tried the door and it was locked. I saw the chickens were gone, too, and the cow and the horses. They all went in the night."

"But do you think Sam would let his family act like that?"

"Sam went to Rutherford yesterday to the academy. No, I don't think he knew a thing about it. He came over after I got home from school to say good-bye, and he was very happy

and—oh, well—good, you know. No one could have looked as he did if he had thought his father was a thief and his family sneaks.”

“But my goodness,” exclaimed Azalea, “don’t you suppose he’s noticed how the men were treating his father—turning their backs on him and all that? Pa McBirney said he just couldn’t bring himself to shake hands with him any more. Don’t you suppose Mr. Disbrow ever had spoken of that at home?”

“He always was bitter and fault-finding anyway,” said Annie Laurie. “Mrs. Disbrow told me that. I suppose a little more or less complaining wouldn’t mean anything to her.”

“But she certainly must have wondered at having the house torn up in an hour or two, and at setting out in the night that way like fugitives,” said Carin.

“Oh, well, you know she hated to go out driving with me for fear the neighbors would be peeping at her, so I suppose she was well pleased to go in the night. She’d hate to have folks find out what a poor little handful of things they had, and all that.”

“Of course,” said Azalea, “it would be easy enough to find which way they went, by the

wagon marks. They must have had the cow tied on behind the wagon, and so they could be followed easily and overtaken if—if you wanted them to be, Annie Laurie.”

“Yes,—I know. If—I wanted them to be.”

The girl sank into a chair and rested her face in her hand, staring straight before her. Azalea and Carin said nothing. They were thinking very, very hard, too. The silence was long and intense. Then they heard Miss Parkhurst’s steps approaching down the hall. Annie Laurie struck her two hands together sharply.

“I can’t do it!” she cried. “I can’t let Sam’s people be chased like that and brought back. I may be wrong, and weak, and not fair to the poor old aunts, but I just can’t do it, that’s all there is to it.”

Carin and Azalea looked at her with perfect understanding.

“No,” said Carin softly, “you couldn’t do that, could you? Plenty of people could, and they’d be just and right—maybe. But you couldn’t, and I like you, Annie Laurie, because you can’t.”

Azalea clapped her hands.

“So do I!” she agreed. “It will all come right for you, Annie. That’s what dear Ma McBir-

ney would say if she knew. Somehow it will all come right. But to have that poor, sneaking, miserable man chased, and that sick woman, and little Hannah who is half-frightened out of her life anyway—oo-oo-oo! You couldn't."

Miss Parkhurst opened the door. The three girls arose respectfully and answered her good morning.

"Algebra this morning," she said briskly.

Perforce they turned their thoughts to matters that were anything but exciting.

But if they could have known the experiences their friend Sam Disbrow was going through, their lesson would have been even poorer than it was—and Miss Parkhurst had already been obliged to tell them that as mathematicians she did not consider them brilliantly successful.

Sam had set off with a light heart. For the first time in his life he was going away from home—that depressing and melancholy home, against the gloom of which he had set all the forces of his really happy and brave nature. But the home had been too much for him. He could feel it slowly and surely dragging him down into that pit of gloom and distrust where the others lived, and to leave it behind, to have

a chance to go to school and get the education which he felt he must have if he was to make anything of himself, filled him not only with joy but gratitude.

Of course, he still wondered how his father had been able to manage it. He knew that they were very poor—that his father had not been able to make a success at anything. His garden never flourished like that of his neighbors; his chickens never laid well; his cow gave only a fraction of the milk she should; his cotton was but a scanty crop; and even as an undertaker, the only one in Lee, he sometimes was passed over for his remote rival in Rutherford.

Recently things had been going even more wrong than usual. Sam could not explain it, but a general dislike of the whole Disbrow family seemed to have invaded the town. His father never had been popular, but lately Sam had noticed signs of actual aversion. How was it to be accounted for? If ever the faintest shadow of an idea as to the real reason for this dislike entered Sam's mind, he thrust it out, strangled and unrecognizable, from his consciousness. He believed in his father because he believed in himself. He was not a person to whom suspi-

cion came naturally, although he had lived in the midst of it all his days. There is a thing called reaction—the sharp turning of the spirit against a condition or an idea. Sam had reacted against the gray dispositions in his family. He was ready to blossom into the scarlet of courage and good will, of power and joy, if only a little sun could shine on him.

And now it seemed to be shining. He was going away to school as other boys did. There would be a number of fellows he knew, and chief among them would be Richard Heller, the banker's son. He liked Heller. He counted on him to "show him the ropes" at the academy.

It was a long time since he had been in the smart town of Rutherford. His heart leaped in him as he stepped out from the station, his bag in his hand, and felt the throb of the busy town about him. Automobiles were ranged in line about the station, carriages with well-kept horses stood in the shade beneath the fine elms, the paved streets were clean, the street cars new and fresh looking, and everywhere were busy, active people, moving along with that air of confidence and efficiency which too often was lacking at Lee. And it exhilarated Sam. All that was

strong and eager in him liked it. He wanted to be a part of a community like that.

He took the street car that ran to the academy, and sat wrapt in interest at noting the fine homes, the well-kept lawns, the excellent public buildings. People were doing things here that were worth while, said Sam to himself. And he, in his way, was going to be a part of it. Perhaps he could stay in the Academy till he was graduated—with honors, maybe—and then he would stay on at Rutherford, and become a part of its busy, stirring life. He would have a home like the one he was passing, with tall windows, and the light streaming in through beautiful trees, and a porch like that, with his family sitting out on it in the open, and not hiding away in the shadow. Then there would be bright flowers, like those in that yard, and friends coming and going the way they were from that house. And they would be laughing—Annie Laurie loved to laugh—and sometimes they would eat on the lawn. But he drew himself up with a flush. What had Annie Laurie to do with it all? A girl like that—would she care seriously for one of the queer, shiftless tribe of Disbrow? Sam

hit his knee angrily. Let him attend to what was before him and stop thinking nonsense.

He reached the Academy, and walked along under its wonderful white oaks to the Ballenger dormitories, where he knew Heller stayed. Perhaps Heller could get him a room near his own. It was rather a trick to get in the Ballenger dormitories and the fellows who succeeded were considered lucky. But perhaps Heller could manage it for him somehow—they always had been good friends.

He was directed along the corridors, hung with their many pictures, and decorated with plaster casts, to a corner room on the third story.

He knocked expectantly.

"Come!" commanded Heller's voice.

Sam threw open the door.

"Dick!" he cried, "I've come on to school. What do you think of that?"

He dropped his suit case and hastened toward Richard with outstretched hand.

Dick took it silently. His eyes, that used to be so cordial in their glances, turned upon Sam with a scrutinizing look. They searched his drooping face sharply. Then something like the old expression returned. Sam was not slow.

He saw that something was quite wrong—that Dick had been thinking evil of him in some way, and that now that he had met him face to face, he was finding it difficult to sustain the suspicion.

“What’s the matter, man?” Sam cried. “What are you looking at me like that for? Why don’t you speak?”

“Sit down,” answered Dick brusquely. “Something *is* the matter, Sam, but I’d rather be skinned than tell you what it is. All the same I’m not going to go around snubbing you and leaving you in the dark after all the good times we’ve had together.”

“I should think not, indeed,” cried Sam. “Skin away, old man. Let’s have the operation over with.”

Dick, it was evident, dared not give himself time to think. He blurted out what he had to say.

“My dad wrote me that you were thinking of coming down here to school.”

“Well?”

“Well, and he said the neighbors all were wondering where in the dickens your father got the money to send you.”

"I don't know," answered Sam angrily, "that it is any of their blamed business."

"It mightn't be under some circumstances," Dick went on. "But—"

"Yes?"

"This is where the skinning process comes in."

"Rip ahead."

"But they think it mighty queer, you know, that your dad should come into money just at the time that Simeon Pace's money disappeared."

Sam was on his feet.

"Say!" he gasped, "I don't understand."

"They say," went on Dick, gulping with distress, yet determined to finish the whole story then and there, "that Simeon Pace carried his money in his hollow tin arm, and that your father took that arm from Simeon Pace's body, and helped himself to the money. Now, there you are, and—dang it, Sam,—you'll have to try to forgive me for telling you."

Sam sank into his seat again and sat staring. The little clock on the mantel shelf ticked off the seconds briskly—ticked on and on, and still Sam sat and stared, and Dick waited, hardly daring to breathe. He could see that Sam was

going over the whole situation— was balancing this against that, thinking over the things he had noticed, “sizing up” the situation with his good clear brain.

Suddenly he got up and seized his suit case.

“Where you going?” shouted Dick.

“Home,” said Sam quietly. “I’m going home.”

Dick ran forward and, grasping Sam’s hand, wrung it with all his strength.

“Oh, Sam,” he cried. “How I wish it could have been otherwise! But I had to tell you. I couldn’t let a thing like that lie between us.”

“No,” said Sam wearily. “It’s got to be cleared up. Living a lie! I remember a sermon—Annie Laurie and I heard it—living a lie! No, I *couldn’t*. Good-bye, Dick. It—it wasn’t for me, was it?” He looked about the charming room, and through the window at the great campus. “Good-bye. And—thank you. You did right. It was the only thing to do, since we were such old—”

“Friends!” cried Dick with a half-sob. “Such old friends, Sam. Yes, go home and clear it up. And come back, old man—whatever you do, come back!”

CHAPTER XI

MARCHING ORDERS

Sam saw nothing now of the inviting homes and their lovely gardens as he rode back to the station. The world seemed black shot through with little darts of scarlet. They kept teasing him—these darting flecks of red, sharp-pointed and angry. At the station he found that it was an hour and a half before train time, so he sat down stolidly to wait. He had missed his luncheon, and it was now near dinner time, but it did not occur to him to get anything to eat.

The time, too, raced by, keeping pace with those swift-speeding thoughts of his, on which he could not have drawn the reins had he tried. And presently he was on the train again, going homeward. He soon would see his father, who would not, Sam had to confess with biting shame, look him in the eye nor answer any question frankly. Moreover, it would be his fate to add to his mother's misery; he would see Hannah turning away from him even more than

she had. And all the town would be looking at him with the eyes of suspicion. He would read: "Son of a thief! Son of a thief!" in their averted glances.

Of course his father might not be guilty. And yet, somehow, shamefully, heart-breakingly, it was borne in upon him that he was. And why should he, Sam, who had done no harm to anyone, go back to face it? Why should Annie Laurie and her friends see his shame? He could disappear now—slip off the train at the next station—and walk and walk till he reached some place where nobody knew him, and then he could go to work and care for himself, and win an honorable name. That was what America was for, he had heard Mr. Carson say, to give a chance to the individual. A man had a right to prove himself, and to be judged by himself, apart from and regardless of his family.

Yet, to run away from a thing like that, to let the old neighbors think him a poor wretch, to lose the regard of—of all those he cared about, was out of the question. And moreover, he couldn't let his father go on keeping back the fortune that belonged to others. He'd have to go back and make him right himself.

His thoughts came clashing together as a returning wave meets and breaks against an advancing one upon the seashore. And the tumult and raging was too much for him. He found himself incapable of going on just then. The train stopped for a moment at some woodland siding—the track was but a single one and such stops were occasionally necessary—and almost without thinking, Sam leaped from the platform and slipped away into the twilight.

He walked along, hardly knowing where he was going. His suit case was not much of a handicap, for there was little enough in it. He could not have told, if any one had asked him, why he kept on pounding along the road, nor why, when he came to a heavily wooded hill, he should have gone in through an opening in the trees and begun to climb its gentle slope. He only knew that he was grateful to have the trees closing around him like that, hiding him from the sight of men.

He went on, stumbling over roots, half-starting at deep shadows, and reached the summit. Here the trees had been cut away, and though the songs of those beneath him surged up to his ears, he presently found himself standing be-

neath the clear sky, perfectly sheltered from view. There was a scythe-like young moon, well toward the zenith, and a few pale stars. The weather had softened and warmed and spring was sending her sweet messages abroad. He stood for a moment looking upward; then he cast himself on the ground, with his face to the earth, and in the solitude his sharp suffering gave vent to itself in sobs.

Nor was it alone for the shame and sorrow of the present that he wept. It seemed as if all the tears he had held back during his lonely and baffled boyhood had their way now and streamed from his eyes. He cried blindly, passionately. He emptied his soul of grief. And then he sat up weakly and looked around him. The whip-poorwills were calling to each other. Distant hounds were barking. The delicate little moon was running her fragile skiff over the sky-sea toward its western port. It was night, and the world was asleep. What was it Annie Laurie sang?

“All are sleeping, weary heart.
Thou, thou only sleepless art.”

He hoped she was sleeping—that poor Annie Laurie, who was having so much trouble, and

none of it in any way her fault. And had she, too, been suspecting him? Had she held this terrible idea of his father and kept it to herself? Had she come to his house that day she had been so kind and good, to see what they were like—the Disbrows? He seemed to be on fire from head to foot with shame. Back and forth, like wild beasts pacing, raged his thoughts. He had no idea of the passage of time. Only the stars kept moving on, beautifully, in their wonderful order, and the wind, growing chillier now, blew upon him, and still the whippoorwills called. By and by the color of the world began to change. Something strange happened to the night—it grew pale, thin, transparent. The birds began stirring about, making soft noises. The cattle lowed in the near-by fields. Then a kind of milky lightness, delicate as one of Carin's scarfs, drifted up into the sky. Presently it turned a soft pink; then rosy red; then it was edged with orange and embroidered with saffron. It was sunup, and Sam Disbrow faced the most important day of his life.

He had to make up his mind whether he was a coward or a brave man—whether he was going to run away or stay and fight. And he didn't

know. As he got dizzily to his feet, he hadn't an idea which he was. But the colors in the sky seemed to be cheering him on like trumpets. Something wild, strange and splendid swept into his spirit—something that made him feel as if he were about to set out on a march with brave men—men who could die for an idea. It was as if he had swung into the ranks, and his leader had shouted "Forward, march!"

Sam went down the hill, and struck a road on the far side of it. He followed it to a farmhouse and asked if he might have some breakfast. They gave him good bacon and corn bread, butter and milk. He ate like one famished, and then, having learned the schedule of the trains, and that he had barely time to catch the next one bound toward Lee, he ran as hard as he could to the distant station. The train drew in while he was yet a block away, but he sent out a shout that startled the engineer in his cab. Good-naturedly, they held the train for him. He swung on the rear platform. And, though he could not forget for a moment all that he was going back to, still he was indefinably happy.

"Forward, march," his invisible leader had commanded. Sam did not stop to find a name

for this leader—to call him God. He obeyed, and having placed himself under marching orders, he fell asleep, and when the conductor called him at Lee, arose refreshed, and went out to fight his battle.

There were not many persons on the street. A mid-forenoon quietude rested over the little town. A few neighbors Sam did meet, but they had no chance to turn the cold shoulder to him this morning for he hardly saw them. He was bent for home, and he strode forward with no thought of anything but meeting his father face to face and hurling at him the question:

“Did you take Simeon Pace’s money?”

He forgot that he was a son, and must pay a son’s deference, or that Hector Disbrow, suspected of being a thief, was his father. He felt as if his soul must put that inquiry to the soul of the man. And on his answer depended honor, happiness, everything.

As he drew near the house, he saw that there was something unusual about it. With a sick feeling, he realized that it looked even more vacant and dejected than ordinarily. He tried the front door; found it locked; sped to the rear; was unable to enter; and then, rushing to the

stable, realized the whole truth. His family had gone. They had run away in the night. The whole thing was true. His father was a thief—and now he was making of himself a fugitive.

But the feeling of having come back to fight a battle as a brave man would fight it, did not desert him. The black despair of the night before had been routed by all the better angels of his nature. He was in the thick of the battle now, beyond question. He turned his back on the house and went toward the town.

On his way, he met Hi Kitchell, who had been excused from school because of a toothache, and who was running along, his hand to his face, quite willing to talk about his misery to anyone. Sam called him.

"Hello, Hi. Toothache?"

"You bet!"

"What you going home for? Why don't you go to a dentist?"

"Naw. I'm going home."

"No use in that. Turn around the other way. Come on down to the dentist's."

Hi wriggled. "I'm afraid."

"I'll go with you."

"Will yeh?"

"You bet I will. And Hi, I've got a trouble that's much worse than toothache."

"Have you, Sam—for sure?"

"For sure I have, Hi. Now if you had a terrible trouble what would you do? I've told you where to go to get a toothache cured, but where would you go if—if everything you cared for seemed tumbling to pieces?"

Hi came up close to Sam. He had forgotten about his toothache, and he looked at Sam with his ferret eyes, in which the tears had now gathered.

"Sam," he said under his breath, "I know about your trouble. I've heard of it. And—and you know your people have gone away. They've gone over the mountain, I reckon. Why, Sam, if I was in trouble like that I'd go straight to Mr. Summers."

"But he's the Methodist preacher, you know, and my folks are Baptists."

"What's the difference?" cried Hi defiantly. "I don't see no difference. Anyway, if Mr. Summers was a Populist I'd go to him just the same."

Sam was surprised to hear himself laughing.

"I will," he declared, and he and Hi tramped on toward town. At the dentist's office Sam started to turn in with Hi, but Hi stopped him.

"You don't need to come," he said. "I reckon I can stand a little tooth-tinkering. You get on to Mr. Summers. And—and. Sam—"

"Yes?"

"If you don't want to stay up there to the house alone, you come down to our place. My ma, she'd love to have you. Sam—"

"Yes."

"We know what trouble is, ma and me, see? Don't nobody around these parts know better than we do. Mr. Carson, he set us on our feet, and now we can hold up our heads and look people in the face. My, but it feels good! But we know what trouble is—all kinds, pretty near. You come to us."

Sam held out a tense hand.

"Put it there, Hi."

Hi "put it there" and turned valorously up the dentist's terrible stairs.

As for Sam, he kept vigorously on his way. He thought of those automobiles he had seen the day before, and he felt as if he were all cranked up, with a good spark on, and was ready for a

long hard run. So he turned up Burchard Avenue, and in at the gate of the little Methodist parsonage.

The first person he saw was Mrs. Summers, who had just got baby Jonathan asleep and was setting him out of doors in his carriage, to grow. She held up a small brown finger to warn Sam that conversation was not to be permitted in the vicinity of the sleeping prince, and led the way into the living room. Then she went in search of her husband, who, it appeared, was shut up in the cell-like room he called his study. He came striding out of his retreat and grasped Sam by the hand.

"Thought you were off to Rutherford, son."

"So I was, sir, but—I came back."

"So I see. Why?"

"I—I heard what they were saying about my father, sir. Dick Heller told me."

"Well, well, he did, eh? It was better on the whole, I reckon. I had two minds to tell you myself, and then I just lacked the ginger. But now you know what you're up against, don't you? And your folks left last night, too. Some of the neighbors wanted to have a posse set out after them and bring them back, but Mr. Car-

son said Annie Laurie Pace was dead set against it. So he forbade it. You don't mind my speaking right out? It's best that way, isn't it?"

"Best that way," murmured Sam with dry lips.

"But you've come back, son, to face the music. Well, what can I do to help you?"

"Mr. Summers, do you think my father guilty? Do you think he took the money?"

"I've no more information on the subject than you," said Mr. Summers. "What do you think—as man to man?"

They faced each other silently. Each knew that the other gave verdict and that it was "guilty."

"And yet," said Mr. Summers, "circumstantial evidence is a shaky thing. A very shaky, tricky thing."

"Yes," said Sam. But there was no hope in his tone.

"What do you mean to do, Sam?"

"I've come to ask you, sir. I've a hundred dollars that father gave me. I'd like to give that to Annie Laurie if it would help her out any. But what is a hundred dollars? Why, Mr.



“But you’ve come back, son, to face the music.”

Pace had thousands and thousands! And I hear they're having a terrible hard time altogether—that they can't get fit helpers, and that Miss Adnah isn't turning out so good a boss after all, and that the accounts are getting all mixed up. It looks as if the whole thing was going to pieces."

"It needn't," said Mr. Summers rather sharply.

Sam looked up questioningly.

"If they had one good strong, capable helper on the place, say a man who was willing to work for nothing for the time being, a man with sense enough to find out the best ways of feeding cattle and caring for them, and peddling milk, and who wouldn't mind sitting up after a hard day's work to straighten out books, and who'd try to build up instead of putting in his best licks tearing down—the way those fool hands they have now seem to be doing—why, there'd be some hope. See?"

Sam got to his feet.

"Do you mean, Mr. Summers, that I—"

Mr. Summers took his pipe from the mantel shelf, deliberately knocked the tobacco out of

it, refilled it from a generous tobacco can and lit a match. While the match burned he turned toward Sam.

"You can just stake your life I mean it, son," said he.

"But will Annie Laurie—will the aunts let me?"

The reverend Mr. Summers nodded his long, thin head.

"I'll tell 'em to," he said. "Mr. Carson will advise 'em too. You'll be making reparation, Samuel. You'll be squaring yourself and your family. You'll get back what belongs to you, the respect of the community, the regard of your—particular friends. And you'll live here, in my house, understand?"

"Oh, Mr. Summers, I couldn't do that."

"I say you'll live here," roared the tall preacher. "Do you think I'd let you go back to that forsaken house and sit there with all the sneaking ghosts of memory putting their miserable noses in the doors and windows o' nights, making goblin faces at you? Not much. Barbara! Barbara, I say!"

Mrs. Barbara came running on her little feet.

"Absalom," she whispered excitedly, "what's

the use in waking the baby? Don't you know any better than that?"

The giant collapsed.

"Willow waly," he gasped. "Can't I ever remember about that young-un? But, Barbara, I suppose you have been listening to our conversation?"

"I have been sitting in the next room," replied little Mrs. Summers with dignity. "It would have been impossible for me to avoid hearing parts of it."

"Well, then, what do you think? Is this boy going back to that shut-up house of his, or is he going to stay here at the parsonage? That's what I want to know."

Mrs. Barbara smiled her sidelong smile.

"What's the use of asking such a silly question as that?" she inquired. "Of course he's going to stay here. I was just thinking I'd run up that rosebud muslin into curtains for his room."

The Reverend Summers turned a radiant smile on Sam.

"That's the woman for you!" he cried. "You think you can get ahead of her, but you can't! You'd have to be smarter than a possum to get ahead of her. Rosebud curtains! Now, what

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do you think of that, Sam? Could you have got as far as rosebud curtains in that length of time?"

He caught his little wife up in his great arms and tossed her toward the ceiling as if she had been a baby. Then he kissed her so loud that the smack must have been heard in the street, and dropped her in his sleepy hollow chair.

"Where's my hat?" he demanded. "My nice, six-year-old Panama—the Panama of many journeys, of my courtship, of my marriage, and probably of my old age? Why, Sam, you ought to count the rings on that hat. It's more'n a hundred, I reckon—if you judge it like you do oaks. Come, sneak out the back way so as not to shake the royal bed of the slumbering potentate. Where are we going? To talk with Miss Adnah Pace. Yes, I know she's rather a difficult one to manage. But I can manage her. That's my specialty, managing women."

He stopped at the window to throw a kiss to his smiling wife.

"Come on, son," he commanded; "forward, march!"

Had he heard the words ringing in Sam's brain?

Perhaps so. Anyway he spoke them. "Forward, march!" he said. He, too, knew Sam was going into battle.

CHAPTER XII

"THE DOLL LADY"

"My dear Annie Laurie," said Mrs. Carson one Friday afternoon not long after this, "will you do Carin and myself the favor of spending the week end with us? I will send for you to-morrow morning, if you will do so, and we'll have a chance to talk. Whenever we try to talk nowadays, Miss Helena Parkhurst cries out 'Physiography!' or 'Grammar!' or 'American History!' Anyone would think she didn't want us to become acquainted."

She shook her finger smilingly at Miss Parkhurst, who was putting the schoolroom in order at the close of five hard days of teaching, and was well pleased at the thought that she could retire to the peace of her own little sitting room and follow her own inclination for a day or two. There were stitches to take and letters to write and thoughts to think, and the young woman who gave so unstintingly of her time and knowledge to three restless girls, sighed with relief at

the thought of being her own mistress for a while.

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Carson," Annie Laurie had answered. "I should love to come. You can't think what a pleasure it would be. But ought I to leave the aunts? They just sit and watch for me to come home."

"The aunts shall be bidden to Sunday dinner," said Mrs. Carson. "We'll all be gay together."

She did not say it, but she knew that the flutter of getting ready for such an event as going out to The Shoals to dinner would keep Miss Adnah and Miss Zillah well occupied over Saturday.

"Please come, Annie Laurie," begged Carin. "I'm getting quite dull, really."

Annie Laurie turned to laugh at her friend. Quite dull! It seemed impossible that anyone could be dull in the Carson house. Something was nearly always going on. Mrs. Carson would be giving a luncheon to the ladies interested in the Mountain Industries, or Mr. Carson would have gentlemen to dinner—gentlemen who came down from New York or Chicago—or there would be a moonlight picnic, or a riding party, or a musicale, or Mr. and Mrs. Carson would be packing up for one of their sudden journeys.

It was the first time that Annie Laurie had been asked to stay overnight at the mansion. She had been Carin's schoolmate, but hardly more than that, as she understood very well. She had a clear mind, capable of seeing things as they were, and it seemed to her to be a sort of victory that she should, at last, be asked to join them in so intimate and social a manner. It showed her that perhaps she was not so "stiff" after all.

Her thoughts flew to her clothes, as the thoughts of any girl will when bidden for a visit. The wardrobe that used to be so well kept up, in its narrow limits, had grown shabby now. She had been wearing black for her father, and her mourning had consisted of frocks which originally had been colored and which had been dyed. They had not taken the dye very well, and they felt either rough or flimsy to the touch. Annie Laurie would have liked to put charming clothes on that big strong body of hers. Her ideal of beautiful dressing was before her daily, in Mrs. Carson, whose dresses, lovely in color and texture, never seemed to have too much trimming on them, or to do anything but drape and decorate her slender graceful figure. But Annie Laurie had more sense than vanity, and

she said to herself that she would not miss such a pleasure and privilege as a two-day visit at The Shoals because of shabby garments.

She sat, however, late that night, pressing her best black frock, and sewing fresh ruchings into it, curling her plume with her sharp little pen-knife, polishing her boots, putting new bows on her slippers, and running fresh ribbons in her underclothes. She packed her satchel daintily, wrapping up her garments in fresh tissue paper and dropping in a little bag of lavender. Carin should see that she had the tastes of a lady, at least.

There was much to do the next morning, too, for the Pace house was a systematic one, and the Saturday routine must in no way be neglected. But by half-after-ten, Annie Laurie, fresh, and glowing with anticipation, stood with her hat and jacket on waiting for Carin; and not more than a minute behind time, Carin drove up to the door, all in charming spring green, and carrying a bunch of pink tulips in her hands for the aunts.

"We're to take a little drive the first thing, Annie Laurie," announced Carin. "The valley is delightful. Everything is bursting into bloom

at once. Mother said we must go and look and look and smell and smell till we have soaked in the spring."

What care-free, happy people the Carsons were, Annie Laurie thought. One had only to be with them a very short time to be convinced that the world was an immensely pleasant place.

So on they went up the sweet valley, over which the mountains hung with a friendly and benevolent air. The Judas trees were in bloom and the orchards budding; on every branch the fresh leaves were starting out, and the crimson maple had flung forth its beautiful foliage. Annie Laurie felt her heart leaping in her, and the black care that had been hanging over her of late lifted like mist before the sun. Looking up, she could see where Azalea's house was perched fairly upon the edge of the mountain ledge. There it hung, like an eagle's great nest, daringly near the long slope of old Mount Tennyson.

"Isn't she a dear—that Azalea girl?" asked Carin enthusiastically. "Never was there such a friend! Why, just having her believe in me the way she does, makes me long to do things. For example, I had known since I was a very,

very small girl that I could draw and paint a little, and I was forever asking for a studio. But when mama had given me one, I was so lazy and dreamy that I hardly did anything in it. Then Azalea got after me. She said I was going to be a great painter. She found trees and hills for me to paint. She sat for me herself, patiently, hour after hour, while I made horrible daubs of her. But she kept saying I could do better if I tried, and do you know, by and by I actually did do better. Then papa decided I had a bit of talent, and he arranged with Mr. Bascomb to come up from Rutherford once a week to give me instruction. And by and by when I'm old enough I'm to go back to Chicago to the Art Institute, maybe; or to New York; and afterward if I show I'm worth it, to Paris or Rome."

"Oh, oh!" sighed Annie Laurie in a sort of rapture. "Paris! Rome! Will you really be able to go to places like that, Carin? But I forget—you already have been to them."

"Yes, I've been," said Carin. "And you'll go too, sometime, if you want to badly enough. Of course, it happened to be easy for me. Papa and mama took me, and I didn't half appreciate it,

I was so young and the chance came so easily. But I shall appreciate it next time; and maybe you'll go with me. Who knows?"

Annie Laurie drew back in her seat with a sort of shudder.

"Oh, Carin," she said, "I'm afraid things aren't going to be like that with me. Fine chances aren't going to come my way. Once I might have thought they would, but now everything is changed. There seems to be so little chance of finding poor dad's money, and I know so little about earning any. Of course since Sam came, it's better. The cows are being properly cared for, the milk gets off in time, and the bills are sent out correctly, and all that."

"Wasn't it fine of him to come back and work for you like that?"

"Fine? I think it was magnificent. At first, the aunts couldn't understand it at all. You know I hadn't told them my suspicions about Mr. Disbrow, and I had begged the neighbors not to do so. The idea hadn't occurred to them. It was better for them to go on hunting and prying around all their lives than to get to hating some one and feeling revengeful. So they couldn't see what Sam meant by saying he would

come and work for us for nothing. Aunt Adnah never had liked him very well. She called him 'that Disbrow boy.' But Mr. Summers and Mr. Carson persuaded her that Sam was going into the dairy business sometime and that he would consider it a privilege to work for us and learn the business, and that contented her. It made her think he was practical and she began to like him better. As for Sam, he works from early morning till late at night, and the place begins to look the way it did when dad was managing it."

"And does he seem happy—Sam?" asked Carin.

"No—o, I can't say he does quite. But he's something better than happy. He goes around with a strange look on his face, as if his own thoughts interested him more than anything else. He'll hardly talk with me at all. I'd think that he disliked me, only I know better. He's ashamed for his family and he won't intrude on me. That's what he's thinking. At first I tried to make him feel differently, but then I saw I was bothering him, and so I made up my mind to let him alone. I reckon he knows I'll never go back on him."

"And he hasn't an idea where his people are?"

"Not an idea."

"If they were going West why didn't they take the train here at Lee? What made them go wandering away in the mountains?"

"Well, I've talked with Mr. McBirney about that, and he says Mr. Disbrow was a mountain man born and bred, although he's been living in town the last few years, and he says no mountain man would go off and leave his chickens and cow and dogs behind him. It wouldn't so much as occur to him to do it. Then, too, he thinks Mr. Disbrow didn't dare try to take the train at Lee. If the people had seen him going they would have stopped him. Besides that, I don't believe Mrs. Disbrow would be willing to go on the train where everybody could see and stare at her. You know she can't bear to be looked at. I suppose it's because she's so like a ghost. Why, her clothes just hang about her like the rags on a scarecrow, and her face is the color of dough and all fallen in. It's a fact; everyone would turn to look at her. She doesn't look as if she had lived in the world at all—and she hasn't for a good many years."

"Well, how do you account for Sam? How

could a boy like that come from such a family?"

"Mr. Summers says that there's no inheritance for souls—that every soul comes fresh from the hand of God. Sam's soul is too brave to be overcome by his surroundings. That's all I can make out of it."

Carin shook her head doubtfully.

"Well, maybe that's so. Yet it seems to me there's more of a mystery to it than that. Your Aunt Adnah may think he's a 'Disbrow boy,' but he certainly doesn't seem like it to me."

They were turning in at the gate of The Shoals now, and Annie Laurie looked about her with delight. Gardeners were busy all over the place; fresh awnings of orange and black had been hung from the many windows; yellow tulips appeared in flaming companies along the walks and about the house. Chairs and tables of brown rattan were on the porches; swinging couches heaped with pillows invited one to take one's ease; books and magazines were placed temptingly at hand. Annie Laurie thought what a contrast all this was to her own meager home, and gave a sharp little sigh. But she was determined to enjoy herself without stint for these two bright days.

And this, indeed, was easy to do. Luncheon was served to the girls in Carin's studio, and there for the greater part of the afternoon the two read, sang and laughed together. Carin had at least three books which Annie Laurie "simply *must* read"; and Annie Laurie was insistent that Carin should do some painting, "beginning at the very beginning," and show her how it was done.

"Then I'll paint you," declared Carin, and made her friend stand, straight and tall before a draping of red-brown velvet which was just a shade browner than Annie Laurie's hair.

"But I ought to be a fine artist to do you justice," Carin protested, "not just a silly niggling beginner. Just you wait, Annie Laurie! Some day you are going to be a beautiful woman, and by that time I hope to know enough to paint you the way you ought to be."

Then there was a walk in the late afternoon, and tea with Mrs. Kitchell at the Industries, and then the stroll back in the lilac-tinted air, and the fun of dressing together for dinner.

Annie Laurie could hardly make her own toilet for watching Carin, as she came all fresh from her bath, in her dainty garments, and

slipped into her simple, exquisite frock of clinging white silk. A maid came to tie her corn-colored scarf, and to wind the broad corn-colored ribbon about her wonderful hair, which was almost the same color, only full of light and shine as no ribbon ever could be. Her slender feet were in white, too, and about her neck was a necklace of clouded amber beads.

"What a love you are," cried Annie Laurie.

"No more a love than you are yourself," retorted Carin. "Look!"

She swung her friend around to face the cheval glass, and Annie Laurie saw her own tall, almost haughty, young figure mirrored there, in its plain, well fitting gown of black. She caught a glimpse of her own pretty slippers with their smart bows, of her straight fair neck—Carin had forbidden her to wear her net yoke—and of her red-brown hair wound around and around her head.

"Talk about loves!" said Carin, and led her friend down to the drawing room. There were a number of persons there, it seemed, and Annie Laurie had a confused moment as she was presented to them. She had not been in this room before—at most had glimpsed it from the cor-

ridor. Now that she was in it, with the many candles burning in their sconces, the flowers everywhere in vases little and great, with the delicate pinks and yellows of the draperies and furniture making an effect like a wonderful manufactured flower garden all about her, she had a sick feeling of shyness and almost wished that she had not accepted Mrs. Carson's invitation.

"But that's being cowardly," she told herself sharply. "And I'm not afraid of these people, really. They're all kind and good. What I'm afraid of is merely furniture! Now, who would be afraid of wood and cloth and brass! Silly goose!"

Some one—a pleasant-faced gentleman with white hair—offered his arm to the "silly goose," and the next moment they were all making their way to the dining room. It was wonderful there, too. The lights seemed to be picked up by the silver and the crystal and to be thrown back in little sparks at Annie Laurie's dazzled eyes. There was a bright, hurried talking all about her; a talking she could not quite follow. But she had got that new idea in her head, that she was not to be afraid of things like silver and

glass and linen, and that certainly no reasonable person could fear kind friends, and so, in a minute or two, her shyness passed, and she was herself again.

There were delicious things passed her to eat, and Annie Laurie wondered what they really could be and why they tasted different from anything she ever had eaten before. The gentleman who had taken her out to dinner was very kind, and talked to her about her lessons, and the early coming of the spring, and how he had not been in those parts previously, and how much he liked it, and how he wished he did not have to go back to Town. By Town, Annie Laurie discovered that he meant New York.

Then, presently, the conversation died down, and everyone seemed to be listening to the lady who sat at Mr. Carson's right. Her name, it seemed, was Miss Borrow, and she was known, as Mrs. Carson explained, over the mountains as "the doll lady." She had made a great study of the mountain country, its flowers and trees, its little wild, harmless creatures, furred and feathered, and its lonely, quiet people. Sometimes she traveled for months in a wagon, sleeping in a mountain cabin or in her wagon as the

case might be, eating at the simple, hospitable tables of the mountaineers, or cooking by the roadside. And because she was simple and earnest and truly, truly, a friend to all the world, she had been permitted to enter the hearts of the people and they had learned to trust her and to speak out to her almost as freely as they would to one of themselves.

"But please tell us why you are called the 'doll lady,' Miss Borrow," said Carin. "I think I know, but I would so love it if you would explain to Annie Laurie, ma'am."

"Well," said Miss Borrow, turning her dark, rather sad eyes upon Annie Laurie, "it was this way. I had not traveled far in the lonely, silent country that lies back among the mountains, before I discovered that the saddest thing about it all was the children—the little children who had nothing to look forward to, and who did not know how to laugh in the happy, free way that children should. They got into bad and silly ways because there was nothing for them to do. So I fell to wondering how I could help them enjoy themselves, and to tell the truth, I hadn't to wonder very long, for almost imme-

diately it occurred to me that I would give them toys.

"I decided that I would take the boys good knives, so that they could make things, and marbles and balls, so that they might have games; and to the girls I would take dolls. I have gone out from my starting point with hundreds of the dearest, most delightful dollies you could think of, tucked away in my wagon. I have even had to have a second wagon to start with, because of the many things I was carrying along. At first there would be no need to give these things at the houses at which I stayed—the houses nearer the towns. But as I went on and on, over this mountain, and down into that valley and up over the next mountain, I would come on the people who lived in the hollow land.

"They had few friends, or none. They went nowhere. They had nothing to do, except scratch the ground for a little food. One day was like another; and in the faces of the children was a look like that to be seen in the face of a dog—a look of terrible wistfulness, as if there was that in the soul which never could be expressed. To these children I brought my gifts.

The boys were glad of the knives and marbles and balls; but nothing like so glad as the girls were of the dolls. Many and many of them never had seen a doll at all. Yet never once did I have to tell them what they were for. They simply reached out their arms and took them, and hugged them up to them—not before people, understand, but as soon as ever they were alone.

“Some of these lonely little girls had hardly known what it was to be kissed, and they would have been ashamed to throw their arms around their mother’s necks and hug and kiss them; but when they got alone with dolly—their own, own dolly—they kissed and hugged it as if they had been starved for want of things like that. Then when I could take along some extra things, so that they could really change the doll’s clothes, and wash and iron for their pets, then, at last, they really had something to do. They seemed to come to life—not the dolls, but the little mothers. Perhaps the dolls did, too. I’m not sure. They were loved enough to make them.”

“Oh, Miss Borrow,” cried Mrs. Carson, “you

lucky, lucky woman, to be able to think of such a lovely thing and to carry it out!"

"Lucky is that lucky does," said the old gentleman beside Annie Laurie, twisting an old saying to suit his purposes.

"Well," said Carin across the table, under cover of the conversation, "that's why she's called the 'doll lady,' Annie Laurie. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Beautiful," replied the other. "And—and why couldn't we help get some of the dolls ready, Carin? And my aunts—if I could get them to working on those dolls, perhaps they wouldn't be worrying and wondering so much."

Mr. Carson overheard her remark, though it was intended only for Carin.

"Excellent and sensible, Annie Laurie," he said in his light way—that way which meant so much yet seemed to mean so little. "You have said a wise thing. I believe the Misses Pace are to honor us with their presence at dinner tomorrow, are they not, Lucy?"

"Yes," responded Mrs. Carson, "I am glad to be able to say that they are."

"We will try then, as you say, my dear Annie Laurie, to help the aunts find a new and in-

teresting occupation. We will give them—some dolls to play with,” smiled Mr. Carson.

For he knew, and Annie Laurie knew, that the poor fretted old ladies needed them as much as any heart-starved mountain child.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LONG RED ROAD

There was music after dinner, and Mrs. Carson asked Annie Laurie to sing. It was a great moment in its way—that in which the shy girl with the oriole's voice went out before all the company to sing to Mrs. Carson's accompaniment. For a second or two she thought that she really could not. Then it came over her that it was a chance—that she who had lived that plain drab life was standing now where beautiful colors played about her. She was, she said to herself, in the heart of a rainbow. And a song was a song, just as a piece of furniture was a piece of furniture. She had already decided that she was not to be afraid of upholstering and silver and fine glass. Very well, then, why should she be afraid of a song, since she really had a voice and could sing? Her music lessons had been stopped since her father's death, but Mrs. Carson often invited her to sing with her in the schoolroom where Carin's piano stood, and she

was quite aware that she had learned more from Mrs. Carson with her taste and her beautiful, delicate fashion of expression than she could from her teacher. So now, full, free, sad and deep, her young voice arose in:

"All are sleeping, weary heart,
Thou, thou only sleepless art."

She thought of Sam away in his bare room, bending over those puzzling accounts of hers, working for her without pay, to redeem so far as he could his father's terrible wrong. And as she thought of him, and the beauty of the song opened the doors of her heart, it seemed as if all that distrust of mankind which had come to her so bitterly when she first realized the great wrong that had been done her, went drifting out on the tide of song. So the lovely words to their noble setting poured from her lips with a sort of splendor, and when she had ceased, and had stood for a moment, motionless, her slender straight body tense with the rapture of it, she had the great happiness of hearing sincere and enthusiastic applause break from all the company in the drawing room.

Mrs. Carson and Carin were hardly less happy

than she. They made her sing again and again; then Mrs. Carson forbade more.

"We'll not have our singing bird excited so that she'll lose her sleep the first night she stays under this roof," she said. And then she herself, at the solicitation of her guests, sang some of those wonderful songs of hers. Annie Laurie could not understand the words, for they were now in one tongue and now another; but as the music rose and fell, shifting in its beauty as a sunset shifts its colors, or as water ripples in the wind, a great happiness flooded her. She sat thrilling to it, moved to the core of her being by its rhythm, and Mrs. Carson, arising from the piano, came straight to her.

"Annie Laurie Pace," she said in her charming way, "I could feel all the strings of the piano vibrating again in you. You are a true musician. Sometime you and I will sit together night after night and listen to opera."

"Oh!" Annie Laurie gasped. "It — it couldn't be!"

"It shall be," smiled Mrs. Carson. "Wait, child. Wait just a little while."

So, with a head full of new, rich ideas, the girl lay down to sleep that night in the "poppy

room," as the little bedroom opening off Carin's was called. Poppies decorated the wall, were embroidered on the linen covers to dresser, chairs and bed, and the spirit of poppies, sleep, hovered lightly over the room.

The next day dawned beautifully—one of those Sundays which seem to have the very breath of holiness in them. Annie Laurie went with the Carsons to the Episcopal Church, and then they all drove over to the Methodist Church for the aunts. They could see the two, prim and starched, awaiting them on the high church steps, and Mr. Carson leaped from the carriage to assist the ladies down and to help them into his vehicle. Annie Laurie couldn't help giving an affectionate chuckle at the labored propriety of their remarks. They had on their best dresses and they were determined to use their best language. But Mrs. Carson gave no sign that she perceived their stiffness. She chatted on in that winning way of hers, till even the proud and difficult Aunt Adnah felt at ease.

At dinner the conversation turned upon the "doll lady," and Mr. Carson had an idea.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," "we'll hike it! We'll trek it! We'll mush-mush!"

"Papa," Carin protested, "what ever *do* you mean?"

"Mean? I mean we'll follow the long red road, every one of us. Your mother, Carin, and your friends Annie Laurie and Azalea, and Miss Zillah and Miss Adnah. We'll take to the high road—in mountain wagons—and we'll go gyp-sying. It's the spring vacation—or we can make it so if we have a mind. What do you say, Miss Parkhurst? Shall we call it vacation? And will you go with us over the mountains?"

"I'll call it vacation if you please, sir," smiled Helena Parkhurst. "But if I have any time away from my duties, I'd love to go home to my mother. She's very lonely without me."

"You shall, then. Of course she's lonely without you. But what do you say, ladies?" he asked, turning to Annie Laurie's aunts.

Miss Adnah wiped her lips carefully before replying.

"You are very kind indeed, sir, but I never have done such a thing in my life, though I must say that I have rather envied people when I saw them starting off on such an expedition."

"Of course you have envied them, and you shall do so no longer. You shall go and know the joys they have known. As for the dairy, Sam will look after that. If necessary he can have one of my men to help him. You are pleased, I hope, Miss Zillah?"

Miss Zillah turned her faded, quiet eyes on him, and smiled slowly.

"Mr. Carson," she said "all my life I have slept properly under a roof. I have done my duty as I saw it to do. I have conducted myself, I hope, in a ladylike and discreet manner, but—" she hesitated.

"But what, madam?"

"But from childhood I have longed to cook my meal in a pot over a camp fire and to sleep under the pines."

Everybody laughed.

"What's more," went on Miss Zillah, showing the shadow of a dimple in her withered cheek, "I feel that I would love to run about in a short skirt and tie a turban about my head."

"Delightful! Delightful," declared Mr. Carson. "We'll go by the middle of this week."

"But Mr. Carson, ought we?" Miss Adnah broke in. "The—the expense—"

"Expense, madam? There's no expense. All that is needed is time, and of that we have as much as anybody living."

He held up a hand for silence, and in his rich voice, warm with an almost boyish enthusiasm, he repeated a poem he had read but whose author he did not remember:

"Beyond the East, the sunrise, beyond the West,
the sea—

And East or West, the wander-thirst will never
let me be.

It works in me like madness, dear, to make me
say good-bye,

For the stars call and the sea calls, and O! the
call of the sky.

"I know not where the white road leads, nor
what the blue hills are,

But a man can have the sun for a friend, and for
his guide a star.

And there's no end of voyaging when once the
voice is heard,

For the river calls and the road calls, and O! the
call of the bird.

"Yonder the long horizon lies, and there by
night or day,

The old ships draw to home again, the young
ships sail away,
And come I may, but go I must, and if you ask
me why,
You may put the blame on the stars and sun, and
the white road and the sky.'

"Only it's the red road with us, ladies—the long red road, and it winds up the mountains, and down the mountains, and we'll follow it till we long for home again."

"Oh," whispered Annie Laurie to Carin as they walked from the dining room together, "how fine it will be to get the poor aunts away from that house where they worry and search, and search and worry!"

"And don't you see," returned Carin, "that papa is really having in the back of his mind the idea that he may run across the Disbrows? He thinks that, after all, Mr. Disbrow won't quite dare spend that money—at least not much of it. He could talk about going West but he hasn't really the courage to go. He'll drive around in the mountains, shooting a little, and grazing his cow and horses, and eating up the chickens.

Papa says that's the way a man with his rearing would do, probably. So we're to take to all sorts of byroads and odd ways in the hope of finding them."

"Really?" said Annie Laurie. "But—Oh, Carin, if we found them! What a humiliation for them!"

"Well, so far as Mr. Disbrow is concerned, I think he has some humiliation coming to him," said Carin sharply.

Annie Laurie hated to tell Sam they were going to the mountains. She feared he would read in her eyes her knowledge of this second intention—this hope of finding the fugitives. Perhaps he did. He was very silent these days, and he worked furiously. Annie Laurie tried to get him to sit with them evenings, but he would not. His old-time light-heartedness, preserved under so many difficulties, seemed to have passed entirely. Yet he was not sullen nor even sad—only very grave. He was indeed fighting his battle, and it was not an easy one.

But little by little he could see—everyone could see—that he was winning the respect of the townspeople. Men went out of their way

to speak to him and to ask him how he was getting on in his new business and to say they'd be glad to help him out if he got in any difficulty. Some of the nicest women in Lee invited him to their homes; but to all such invitations Sam sent a respectful refusal. He seemed determined to keep to himself until he had won his right to enter other men's doors as an honest boy, the son of an honest man.

He helped with the preparations for the mountain, saying nothing of his shamed and tortured thought that his friends might come upon his skulking family. Mr. Carson was to drive his own team, and Benjamin, his man, was to drive Annie Laurie's horses. So, on a perfumed spring morning the little caravan set off, with Mrs. Carson and the two Misses Pace in the Carson wagon, and Carin and Azalea in Annie Laurie's.

Azalea was strangely excited by the idea of the journey, though she tried to conceal the fact. She could not forget how often she had gone upon such long journeys in those wild, curious days when she was a "show girl." Those days now seemed like a fantastic dream. She felt as if she always had been Azalea McBirney, wrapped about with love and consideration; and

even the memory of her poor dead little mother was like a gray shadow. True, it was a shadow which arose often before her mental vision, but the outlines of it grew fainter and fainter. Yet Azalea loved it. She could not think of that brave, yet broken woman, so out of place with that sorry crew of show people, without a throb of love. Death had, at last, seemed the only happiness for her, and Azalea loved to think of her as safe and at rest in that much-cared-for lowly bed of hers beneath the Pride of India tree beside Ma McBirney's door.

And, oh, the long red road! How it wound up the hills and over them. What valleys it glimpsed, what rivers, amber brown beneath the trees, what spots of quietude and peace beneath the pines, what sunny openings, where succulent odors of grass, freshly sprung, came to the travelers! And, oh, the delight of sleeping in the hastily spread tents—which were really no more than squares of canvas stretched on pointed sticks—and the appetites that developed for the meals cooked over the coals on the convenient tripod!

Now one and now another of the ladies cooked the meals, and they vied with each other in the

mixing of stews. They grew bold and tried things they never had heard of, but which seasoned with mountain air and tested with mountain appetites, seemed the finest of discoveries. And the day and the night were sweet; the wind was their playful companion; the showers were their friends; the sun their great protector; the moon their comforter and all the stars were their intimates.

So the three girls grew browner and brighter-eyed each day, and the heart in each of them—even Annie Laurie's—was light as down.

But not a hint did they have of the Disbrows. Though they plunged deeper and deeper into the mountains, getting far beyond the towns, they saw nothing of them. They went so far that they came at last upon the lonely, sad-eyed people whom Miss Borrow had described. In their miserable cabins, which were far from weatherproof, they lived their curious, solitary lives. Their faces were vacant and mournful; their voices like the sighing of wind in the trees. They walked languidly, and there was a strange and repellent pallor in their faces. Sometimes they sang a little, sitting before their doors

in the moonlight, and their voices rose and fell with a curious cadence. The monotony of their lives rested upon them like a deadly spell, permitting them to nurse senseless hates and animosities, and to keep up foolish family feuds.

Now and then they came upon a desolate schoolhouse, approached by little winding paths, over which bare-footed children had run for weary miles. For they prized their schooling beyond all words to express.

"Whar is her who tells us how?" one little, sallow-faced child had asked when she had run eleven miles to the schoolhouse to find the teacher absent. They heard such stories of starved minds and all but starved bodies, and a deep pity awoke in their hearts for these people of their own blood and of an inheritance much like their own.

"When we are a little older," said Azalea, her eyes shining with a deep purpose, "we will come back and teach them."

"Yes," said Annie Laurie. "We will teach them to read and to sing."

"To read and to sing and to draw," said Carin.

"Very well," said Mr. Carson, laughingly and yet with meaning. "And I'll send some one

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along to help with such trifles as arithmetic, geography, grammar, et cetera, and incidentally I'll foot the bills. Is it a bargain?"

"It's a bargain," said they in chorus.

CHAPTER XIV

HI'S HOUN' DAWG

It was Saturday and Hi Kitchell and Jim Mc-Birney, having done their chores, met by appointment at the spring under the tulip trees where Azalea intended to build her bungalow when she became very rich.

It was a lovely spot and they threw themselves down in perfect content, their dogs near at hand, and looked off at what Hi called a "purty worl'."

"It jes' seems like everything worth speakin' about hed come my way," sighed Hi contently. "You-all remember what a pore little forsaken cuss I was, Jim, when me and 'Zalie came draggin' along with that thar show of Sisson's a year back an' more?"

"'Taint more'n a year, Hi."

"Seems like a century. An' no sooner hed we laid eyes on your pa and ma than things began to go right. An' now look at us. 'Zalie's like your sister and gettin' a tip-top education, and is off ridin' the country over with the Carsons;

and me and ma hev a home anybody would be proud to own, and that thar Industries business is lookin' up more'n more every livelong day. Why we're so happy we're in danger of bustin'. I asked ma t'other day if she didn't feel most like bustin', and she said she did."

"It's a good place to live hereabouts," agreed Jim. "Pleasant things have a way of happenin' 'round here. If it wa'n't for that dod-gasted hard luck of Annie Laurie's, I'd think this was where the nicest folks in creation lived. But some one done her a mean, low-down trick."

"It was that scowlin', grumblin' Disbrow," averred Hi. "I know it. Ma says she feels it in her bones, and so do I, and Kitchell bones is simply great for givin' pointers. I say, what's the use in you and me loafin' 'round here while that mis'able, sneakin' houn' gets off with Annie Laurie's money? Ain't we her friends and as nigh kin as she's got? What say to you and me hikin' out after that thar Disbrow an' findin' him and bringin' him back to justice?"

Hi's sharp black eyes sparkled with the high intent of protecting the friendless. The bright light of adventure shone round about him, and Jim thrilled to it. Here was a friend worth hav-

ing—a friend like those knights of old of whom Azalea read to him, one who would go out and conquer. Jim stared off across the purple valley, rejoicing in his good fortune at living in days when there was still a man's work to do in the world.

"Hi," he breathed after a time, "I'm with you."

"Then," said Hi, with something of the air of an Arctic explorer about to embark on his hazardous voyage, "we must make ready. Thar's no use in waitin' around here, dreamin' and sighin' the way the rest of the town is doin'. Let's get our grub together and be on our way."

"I wish I could take Peter," said Jim wistfully. Peter was his hound. "But he's got such a sore foot I don't dast. Ma, she doctors it up every morning and she says we'll have to be mighty careful or we won't have no dog at all—he'll die from blood poisonin'."

"It's too bad," agreed Hi, "but we-all ken take Bike." Bike, Hi's hound, wagged his tail in recognition of the attention paid him.

"It will make me feel awful bad for you to take Bike and me to be goin' along without no dog at all," mused Jim.

There seemed to be no limit to Hi's chivalry to-day.

"Well then, by gum, I won't take Bike," he declared, his face lighting with the glow of sacrifice. Jim was not unappreciative.

"Honest, Hi!"

"Honest."

"Well then, let's send the dogs home and we can go right on from here. We don't need no provisions. I've got some money—"

"So have I."

"What's the use of delayin' then. Let's set off."

So the dogs were commanded to go to their respective homes, and with lowered tails and drooping ears, they obeyed. Bike writhed along on his belly, beating the ground with his tail. He actually shed tears of humiliation and depression, but Peter, more absorbed with the discomfort in his foot, limped lamely and obediently on his way toward home.

"Pore houn's," sighed Hi, "they sure are cast down."

"Ain't it just their luck," Jim sympathized. "Pore critters."

Both boys were talking their worst and en-

joying it. This spang-up grammar was well enough to catch on to when a fellow was talking with Mrs. Carson, or even to Azalea, but there was such a thing as letting down and enjoying oneself when the ladies were out of the way. Men must be men now and then.

So, in all the freemasonry of their kind, the two set off across the mountain. Neither one would have confessed that the "wander-thirst" was on them too. But the truth was, Mr. Carson had set a most infectious example. Mountain folks have pretty hard work staying at home. The roads call, and they long to be up and away. It always seems as if something wonderful must be waiting for them over the next hill. Jim and Hi had the gypsy mood on them this day. They actually ran for a long time, taking the cut-offs that led them over the spur of the mountain to Mulberry Valley, which lay "over-yon" and which they had seldom visited, and then always under the guidance of some grown person who insisted on pushing them along and getting home again.

Getting home seemed to them just now as the last thing in the world that a fellow would care to do. What was the use in getting home when

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a person could run along paths bordered with trim huckleberry bushes, or rest on a stone where lichen had woven a pale green lace? There were partridge berries peeping up between dark green leaves; here was tender wintergreen; yonder the "sweet buds" were coming out, weighting the air with their fruity odor. Dear me, why should anybody go home?

There was an eagle hanging over the valley, strong, and calm, and sure. Three buzzards sat on a blasted pine and shook their evil heads; a king snake gave them a chase and got away from them in spite of their best endeavors. And still the little path went on and on. It passed by a deserted house, where the bats hung from the roof. It wound by wooded hills and fields that once had been tilled, but had perhaps proved too unfertile, and so been left; it crept on up the farther mountain,—the unknown mountain—and still coaxed, and lured, and solicited; and the boys kept on.

Their brown, dusty feet had grown weary and their throats were dry when at length they came upon a cabin. They weren't sure at first whether it was lived in or not. The heavy shutters—there were no windows—were closed, but the

door stood slightly ajar. The chimney, which was made of field stone held together with the red clay of the field, blossomed like a garden with ferns and vines. The yard was bare of grass, but the old stone wall round about it was overgrown with green things, though it was still so early in the year, and the myrtle and mimosa showed their green beside that of the laurel and rhododendron. There was a small well with a sweep, and on the bench lay a broken gourd which had been used as a drinking cup. But over the place was the deepest silence, save for one early bee which made a cheerful buzzing, and seemed to fairly boom, so still was the place.

"I say," whispered Hi, "don't it look spooky?"

"Maybe a hermit lives here," Jim suggested.

"Or a skelington," added Hi.

It was Hi who had the courage to push back the warped door and look in. Jim was a few feet behind him and he never forgot the yell of horror that came from Hi's throat, a yell that had fear in it, fear for the next second's happening. Jim heard a swishing and a hissing, and he knew. Neither formed the word "*rattlers!*" on their frozen tongues. Hi tried to leap backward and fell over a stub of a bush and lay

prone. Jim seized his arm and dragged him along for a dozen feet, and even in the rush they could hear their hearts beating frantically. That swishing and hissing kept up. It seemed to grow louder. Hi turned himself and got on his feet like a monkey. They both ran without looking behind. And after they had started and had got away from the real danger, they began to fear imaginary evils. Panic was on them. With their blistered bare feet they sped on and on, taking no note of where they were going. Their throats, which had been dry to start with, became like paper. Their eyes bulged from their heads. They had started out great heroes, but they had undergone a transformation and were two terribly frightened and tired little boys.

Even as they sank exhausted beneath a pine tree they looked about them shudderingly for snakes, but seeing none they lay there and gasped, their hearts straining in their sides. Then, as their panting ceased, a soft noise struck their ears. It sounded very familiar, and yet in their utter bewilderment they could not at first tell what it was. The meaning penetrated first to Jim.

"A spring," he whispered. "A spring!"

They made their way toward it, dragging their feet like weary dogs, and when they saw it, clear, cold and beautiful, gushing from the ground amid wild forget-me-nots, they sank on their knees and drank long. After that they lay still, staring at the sky. The world swam before them dreamily, the clouds rocked back and forth; they slept.

When they awoke it was dark. It was not just partly dark as it is most nights of the year. No, it was black. They might have been shut up in a black velvet box or lost in a large bottle of black ink. There was nothing above, below, around, so far as their sense could inform them. It was Jim who had opened his eyes first. At least, he thought he had opened them, but when he found he could see nothing at all he had his doubts about having done it. He felt of his eyelids. Yes, they were open, beyond doubt. Had he then suddenly gone blind? He couldn't imagine why he should, and yet, judging from his present plight, it seemed probable.

"Hi!" he shouted, as if Hi were on the other side of a forty-acre lot.

Hi's voice answered close at hand, sleepily.

"Yep!"

"Hi, I believe I've gone blind. I can't see nothing—not a blamed thing."

There was a short silence.

"I can't neither," cried Hi. "Maybe we're both blind."

"It's being so hungry, I reckon," said Jim. "Don't you think a fellah could get so run down from eatin' nothing that he'd go blind?"

"I reckon he might," sighed Hi.

Silence fell again. They could hear the needles as they fell from the trees, the low whispering of the spring, and the far-away sound of wind or rain, they were not sure which.

Then suddenly they knew that they were not blind. All the world was lit up—lit up terribly and then engulfed in darkness again. Then the thunder came, clamoring and roaring about them. They were mountain boys and they had heard thunder roar and rumble over the hills many times, but had it ever had such a frightful bellow as this? It kept on and on and before the first volley had quite died, again the world was lighted with that fiery light—that forked flame—and again the voice of the sky awoke the thousand voices of the hills.

"Oh, gosh!" groaned Hi.

"Ain't there no place to hide?" demanded Jim with trembling voice.

No, there was no place to hide. The storm king owned everything around there that night. It was all his domain and he meant to do with it as he would. So he blasted an oak, and the boys saw it; and he cracked his horrid whip at the invisible horses of the air, and they rushed by screaming. And then the rain came; not drop by drop as rain should, but in drops that chased each other so that they became streams; in streams that became inverted fountains.

The boys couldn't even call out to each other. They fought for breath as the furious winds whipped them and the drenching rain engulfed them almost like a wave. It was a cloudburst, they knew that much, and finally, from mere animal instinct, they turned their faces to the ground, wreathed their arms about their heads and lay prone. Still the lightning flashed and the thunder bellowed; still the winds wailed and the trees snapped. It seemed at last merely a question of keeping alive till it was over.

But by and by it was over. It ceased almost as suddenly as it had come, and weak as half-drowned rats the two boys got to their feet, and

looking up into a clear sky, saw the morning star shining down at them.

"We've got to get home," said Jim, breathing deep.

"Yes," agreed Hi.

It was some time before they could find any sort of a trail whatever, but after a while they came upon one, though whether it had been made by human feet long since and overgrown, or whether it was merely a rabbit run they could not decide. However, they decided to take it. The dawn was flushing the sky and they could make their way without much difficulty now, so far as seeing was concerned, but their feet were blistered and their bodies felt as sore as if they had been pounded. They went on and on, doggedly.

"We're bound to come to a road soon," they kept telling each other.

"Oh, yes, we'll get somewhere."

And they got "somewhere," beyond any manner of doubt. Lifting their eyes at length, they saw before them that frightful cabin of "rattlers," and stealing to the door to greet the brightly shining sun was a fine, confident father of rattlers. Hi gave one despairing whoop and

fled, Jim following, and once more they sped on, taking however an opposite direction from that of the night before and trying to keep their faces toward home. There was the mountain before them to cross, and then Mulberry Valley, and then there was Tennyson mountain to climb. It was really quite simple.

"Anybody ought to be able to do that," said Hi stoutly.

But the trouble was that after an hour's hard plodding they came to a sort of opening and thought they had reached a road at last, and there before them once more was the House of Rattlers. And that was the time they gave up and cried. They dared not stay near there, so they went on their way hastily, but not running now, sobbing as they went.

They were lost, that was all there was to it. They were quite completely lost on a mountain they never had visited before—a mountain where nobody lived and where the only neighborly things were rattle snakes.

They were both wondering if they were going to die there, to starve and be heard of no more. Of course, years and years from then their "skelingtons" might be found. But how-

ever interesting that might be for others, it really would do them no good at all, when you came to think of it.

Ugh, how chilly the morning air was! And how wet their clothes were! And how empty their stomachs! And the rattlers—the rattlers!

There was a strange, bell-like sound in the distance, a deep, musical, beautiful sound. It rang over the hills with a note at once sad and glad. The boys stopped in their tracks and listened. It came again, like church bells, only faster. It thrilled the two forlorn wanderers, and brought the light back to their faces.

"Bike!" shouted Hi. "It's Bike. He's followed us. Oh, Bike, Bike, here we are, you blessed old houn' dawg! Here! Here!"

They put their fingers in their mouths and whistled, they shouted, they laughed, they hugged each other; and then, over a rise came Bike, wild-eyed with delight, large, it seemed, as a bear, and bursting with importance.

He leaped on them till he knocked them down; he insisted on licking their faces, on pretending to bite their calves, on lathering them as if they were puppies. He couldn't have enough of

them nor they of him. But after all, he came to his senses sooner than they.

"Enough of this," he seemed to say. "For goodness sake, let's be getting home."

He turned his back on them and started over the rise, wagging his tail and giving vent to sharp, scolding barks.

"A fine lot of trouble you've put me to," he appeared to be saying. "Hustle yourselves now and get home. Don't you know your folks are worried to death about you? Such boys! Such boys! It wears a respectable hound out trying to take care of you."

And the boys understood and agreed with him. So they followed meekly enough, limping first on one foot and then on the other and calling to him every few minutes not to go so fast.

They went on for hours and hours, as it seemed, but at last they stood beneath the tulip trees by the spring on Azalea's plateau.

"Well," said Hi, "this here is whar we part. We-all don't seem to be bringin' the Disbrows back to get their just punishment."

"I reckon we'd better not say much about punishment," grinned the leg-weary Jim. "So long, Hi. Hope it don't hurt much."

"Same to you," called Hi. He and Bike were already on their way down the mountain, and Jim, tired almost to collapse, made his way up the road to where Ma McBirney paced back and forth, pouring out her soul in prayer.

But Pa McBirney seemed to have some feelings which did not come under the head of gratitude for his son's return. He knew what such a night of torture meant to the dear woman beside him, who already had suffered too many shocks. He looked Jim over with a sternly parental eye.

"If you got what's coming to you, son," he said, "you'd be well lathered."

"I know it, sir," said Jim with conviction.

Pa hesitated. He was a gentle man.

"Well," he said, "if you know it, and if you think you'll remember it, latherin' wouldn't teach you nothing. Go in with your ma and get some food, and then wash yourself up and go to bed. Ma'd better give you some of that salve o' hern for your feet. And Jim—"

"Yes, sir."

"You watch out jest as hard as you can, and don't grow up a plumb fool."

"Yes, sir," said Jim.

CHAPTER XV

THE VOICE IN THE MIST

It has been said that Mr. Carson set an example for the people at Lee which many were tempted to follow. And partly it was the spring calling them; partly it was an itching desire to find the Disbrows. Lee was pretty well disgusted with itself as time went on, for not starting after the absconding undertaker and his family immediately after their disappearance, and they told themselves they certainly would have done it if Mr. Carson hadn't been so dead set against it. And he was put up to acting the way he did, they knew, by Annie Laurie, who was too soft-hearted altogether.

It was a little surprising, all things considered, that the Reverend Absalom Summers should have been the next after Hi and Jim to yield to the temptation to take to the hills. Resisting temptation, as his little wife pointed out to him, ought to be his specialty. But he contrived to down her argument.

"You don't seem to understand my noble soul at all, Barbara," he said. "My real reason for taking to the hills is that I want to visit my two uncles back on Longstreet Mountain."

"But why should you visit them, Absalom, dear? Do you really care about seeing them? Aren't they two quarrelsome old men?"

"Well, they are some quarrelsome, Barbara, and that's why I think I ought to see them, carrying a dove of peace on my shoulder."

"They'd kill a dove of peace and eat it, wouldn't they?" she asked laughingly. "Don't they shoot everything in sight?"

"Pretty nigh," agreed Absalom. "They certainly do have nervous dispositions. They own a lot of land up there on Longstreet Mountain, and the two of them used to live side by side. But their chickens were so inquisitive about what was doing in the next yard, and they got so mixed up running through the fence and forgetting which place was home, that there was a row on early and late between my uncles. It was the same with the calves. If they wanted to break into a field and eat up the corn, they always picked out the field of the next door neighbor. And that made the brothers just dancing

mad. Then once Uncle Ephriam shot a hound of Uncle Aaron's—said he thought it was a timber wolf.

"And so it went. There was always trouble. When they heard I'd become a preacher they sent for me to come up and straighten things out. I stayed up there a month and talked things over and I couldn't get either old stiff-neck to give an inch. So I worked out a plan. Aaron had a likely building site for his house, but Uncle Ephriam's was on a slope and water ran into the cellar when it rained. Well, just in front of them was a deep ravine—mighty pretty it is too. I proposed that Ephriam should move across to the other side of that gulley. I told him if he would, I'd stay and help him put up his house. So Aaron bought Ephriam's old house to use for a barn, and Ephriam moved—chickens, stock, truck and all—across the gulley. We got him a nice sizable house there, and settled him and his wife as comfortable as you please. It was altogether too much work for the calves and the chickens to get across that crack in the earth, and so everyone lived in peace."

"That was fine. But why should you leave

Jonathan and me to go to see them if they're doing so well?"

"They aren't doing so well as you might think, wife. No sooner had I got those families separated, by a convulsion of nature, so to speak, than they took to pining for each other."

"Nonsense, Absalom."

"It's a fact, my dear. They were as lonely as owls. Said they didn't have anyone to talk to, and that it wore them all out plunging up and down that gulley."

"Well, what can you do about that? You don't propose moving Uncle Ephriam back again, do you?"

"Not at all, Barbara, not at all. I merely propose making conversation easy and simple for them."

"With a telephone?"

"Not at all. A telephone would be out of place in the hands of my reverend uncles. I can't precisely tell you why, but you'll have to take my word that it would. No, what I propose to do is to carry them megaphones."

"Megaphones, Absalom!"

"Certainly. Megaphones will become them. They are sturdy, seafaring sort of men—"

"Why, they've never seen the sea!"

"Don't be so literal, dear. They are sturdy, space-roaming, wilderness-faring men in whose hands megaphones will be appropriate. I shall strap one on each side of my horse and set forth—to-morrow."

"But will you get your sermon prepared?"

"I shall prepare it while I'm riding. Seriously, Barbara, the wild man in me is uppermost. You have tried to civilize me. Our young son has labored to do the same thing. But you scratch a Russian and find a Tartar; and you scratch a mountain man and you find a rover."

"And you've been scratched, wild man?"

"I have. I'm off to-morrow. Bear with me, dear. I'll come back as tame as a house cat."

Barbara looked at him with shining eyes.

"You'll have a wonderful sermon," she said. "I know you, dear. Go to your hills—"

"From whence," broke in the Reverend Absalom, his voice changing, "cometh help."

So away he went in the early morning, knapsack well filled, blankets rolled, and a megaphone dangling from each side of his excellent horse.

Yes, he was glad to leave domesticity and

towns behind him; glad to be away from the sound of voices and from the need of proprieties. He was a hill man, after all, he told himself, and lifting his face to the sky he thanked God that he was. They satisfied him, these ancient mountains which once had been lofty peaks and which through all the changing centuries had crumbled and shrunken till they were the friendly little mountains that he knew. They were so old—so old and so full of secrets. And they satisfied his restless, longing, laughing, dreaming soul, the curious soul of Absalom Summers, which differed from all the other souls on earth. Yes, he mused, each soul must differ from another, as the stars in heaven differ.

On he rode through the long day, thinking, dreaming, living a deep and silent life. At night he made his meal, fed his horse, smoked his pipe and thought of his sermon. The stars rolled over him in their silent and majestic courses, and beneath them he knelt to pray for his wife and babe, those inestimably dear treasures of his, those lovely creatures of the hearth-side. They liked their roof; he liked his sky. Well, blessings on them, and might he be forgiven if he harbored too wild a nature in his

bosom! It was not a silent prayer that the Reverend Absalom put up. Far from it. He shouted to the whispering pines; he addressed the distant stars; he felt as if he must send his voice beyond the barriers of silence and reach his God. For that was the kind of man the Reverend Absalom was.

Then, as trusting as a child in his mother's arms, he laid him down to sleep. For he felt the "Everlasting Arms" about him.

The next morning he arose at sunup and went singing on his way. He breakfasted at about seven o'clock, and stimulated by his powerful cup of coffee—which, truth to tell, was a fearsome liquid—he pushed onward. The road he had chosen was difficult to keep and hard to traverse. There were, of course, easier ways of reaching Longstreet Mountain, but in order to reach them he would have had to take a train, and nothing was further from his inclination at present than riding by steam. He wanted just what he was having, the heave of good horseflesh beneath him.

The day passed without events other than the sort he desired: the lift of a bird from a bush, the rippling of a stream across his path, the nos-

ing of the horse at the ford, a burst of laurel blossoms in a sunny path. He went on, whistling and singing. Oftenest it was his old, best-loved hymn: "A mighty fortress is our Lord."

Along late in the afternoon a mist began to gather over the mountain. It blurred everything delicately; it put a soft, filmy veil over the face of the landscape and enhanced its beauty by so doing. But after a while it began to be a bit eerie. As the wanderer cooked his evening meal it seemed as if shadowy white figures drew near, bending over him, and then flitting away as he arose. It did no more than amuse him, of course. He knew the tricks of the mountain mist. But he couldn't help remembering how terrified he had been once as a child when he had been out on a night much like this, and had had a five mile walk alone with a lantern in his hand, which seemed to summon ghostly figures from the roadside.

"It would be a bad night for a man with a bad conscience," he said aloud. "He would think there were avenging spirits on his track, sure enough. Come to think of it, I've plenty of things to have a bad conscience about myself. I'd better be watching out or the goblins will

get me. And whatever would wife Barbara and baby Jonathan do then, poor things!

The place where he had lighted his camp fire was in a little hollow and the mist gathered very thickly there, so he concluded that it would be better to go on farther up the mountain. It was possible that he might find an airier place where the draft would keep the heavier clouds away. So once more he put his horse to the path and went on silently, rather weary, and heartily wishing that the night were fair.

He was very far from the beaten road, in a place so solitary that he could not hope to meet anyone, so it was with no little surprise that he found himself, suddenly, almost upon a group of human beings. They were sitting, three of them, around a fire, well wrapped from the chill. There was a sort of rude hut beside them, fashioned of saplings and thatched with pine boughs. Here, apparently, they slept. They were not then like himself, wanderers, but campers. Well, it was a quiet place for a camp, and no doubt a sightly one—

His thoughts broke off like a thread that is snapped. He recognized the persons at whom he was looking. They were the Disbrows! They

were the fugitives. At first he thought of going right up to them, but something withheld him. He could hear Mrs. Disbrow's voice, and he slid from his horse and having tied him, crept nearer with as much stealth and skill in silence as an Indian, that he might listen. There were things he felt that he must know, and that as Sam's friend he had a right to know.

"I don't mean to go on, pa," Mrs. Disbrow was saying. "What's the use of going on? Whatever would it mean for me but another house to look after, and me lacking the strength to do it? Hannah would drudge and drudge, and that's all there'd be to it. Living like this there aren't any pantry shelves to clean or doorsteps to scrub. That's a great point to a woman with no elbow grease. You understand, pa, it's been pretty dull for me these last few years back. You can't tell what it is to lie awake all night wondering if the morning will ever come, and when the morning comes, hating it because the light tears your eyes out and the noise splits your ears."

"But you seem to stand the light and the noise here well enough, ma."

"So I do. That's why I want to stay. The

only noise is what the crickets and birds make, with now and then a bee humming or an owl screeching. And the light is green, coming through the trees. Why, it's as if a thousand years had rolled off my back. There's no one around wondering about me, and trying this trick and that to get a sight of me."

"No one ever did that, ma," cried out the shrill voice of Hannah. "That was just your imagination. It was your being sick made you think that way."

"Well, however that may be, out here we're free. Now I propose, since you've got some money, pa, that we move around here and there, like a nice family of bears—the father, and the mother and the baby bear."

She gave a curious, unaccustomed laugh. Then suddenly she turned toward her husband, and Mr. Summers could see her wild eyes gleaming in the firelight.

"But what I can't make out, Hector," she said, "is where you got that money. Why don't you talk out the way a husband should to a wife? Here we've been living so close to the wind that we hadn't enough to satisfy us, and Hannah's been going without enough to clothe

her decently. Now, of a sudden, your pockets are full of money! What does it mean, Hector? And why did you clear out of Lee in the night? When you gave the word to go I was feeling so dull in my head that I didn't care whether the thing was right or wrong. But now I seem to have come to life. I've got to thinking again, like I was a real human being. And Hector—"

Her voice carried on the air with the wild note of a loon.

"Hector!"

"Well, ma, go on, for goodness sake."

"How did it come that you got that money just when Simeon Pace's money disappeared? Tell me that, husband! Tell me you didn't have anything to do with it! My life's been queer and dark, but it's been honest. You've turned out a different man from what I thought you'd be. I hoped on and on for you, but you didn't get anywhere, and I got worn out and took to my bed and meant never to get out of it. But even when you'd taken all the spunk out of me I never thought you was anything but honest. Are you, Hector? Are you honest—or a thief?"

It wrung Summers' heart; yet he knew that the time had come for judgment. He had been

a boy of wild pranks and he loved a prank still. An idea came flashing into his head. He crept back to his horse, loosened one of the megaphones and put it to his mouth, and in that voice which had electrified great camp meetings, magnified many times by the horn, he bellowed into the mist:

"Disbrow, thief! Give back the money you stole! Make restitution! Return the money of the orphan! Simeon Pace is in his grave, and his orphan's money is in your pocket! Disbrow, thief!"

The great megaphone waved up and down in the air, and the accusing voice was borne to the group around the fire, as if carried on winds from the furthestmost heaven. In the white gloom, with the wreathing wraiths of the mist dancing about them, the dark cavern below, the sighing trees above, the monstrous voice, like that of an angry angel, besieged their ears. Summers was too far from them to see them cower, and he could not see their stricken faces. His heart secretly misgave him for what he might be doing to the woman and the girl, but he did not flinch for all that. He gave out one last call:

"Make restitution! To-morrow at sunrise set

out upon your journey. Do not pause till wrong has been made right. This is the first warning. Beware the second!"

The mountain echoes caught it up and shouted the words back, while up and down the chasm below the roadway the mist figures writhed and climbed. Summers mounted his horse and stole back the way he had come till he reached the bottom of the gulch, then taking the path on the other side of it, he proceeded on his way. It was almost dawn when he drew rein, tethered his horse, and laid him down to sleep.

"I hope," he said to his horse, "that I haven't scared those poor women to death. But it had to be, you see—nothing else for it." And then suddenly he burst into a wild torrent of laughter. It rolled out of him in waves; it shook him like a convulsion. And having eased his soul, he lay down and slept.

CHAPTER XVI

GOOD FOR EVIL

The Carsons and the Paces, with Azalea, came driving home one chilly evening in a light fall of rain. They were tired and cold and had altogether an after-the-picnic sort of feeling. Indeed, when Azalea, who was to stay in the valley for the night, and Annie Laurie had helped the aunts into the house, they found them so travelworn that they insisted that they should get into bed at once and have their suppers brought to them.

A few weeks before, Aunt Adnah would have perished rather than submit to such an indignity, no matter how comfortable she found it. And Aunt Zillah would not have indulged in such a luxury with her sister's stern eye upon her. But more and more Annie Laurie's determined will was having its way in that household, and when to her command was added Azalea's importunities, the aunts yielded.

Sam had the fires burning for them in a few

minutes, and as the old ladies undressed and toasted their shins before the blaze, and thought of the two competent young girls down in the kitchen who were preparing supper for them, they experienced the luxurious feeling of those who are old, well-loved, and carefully looked after.

"If they were girls who would be getting everything out of its place," said Miss Zillah to Miss Adnah, "I don't suppose we'd feel as comfortable as we do; but they take hold just as we would ourselves. I'm bound to say that I wouldn't know how to stand on my feet to get supper to-night."

"And here Annie Laurie has filled those new fangled water bottles for us, and looked out our warmest nightgowns. We certainly have a lot to be thankful for, Zillah. When brother passed away I thought that I would just naturally step in and take charge of things—I believed I had the strength for it and the brains for it,—but it seems it was not to be. Whether it was the shock of Simeon's death or merely that I'm getting old, I wouldn't undertake to say, but certainly I'm not the woman I was. Why, suddenly when I think to be the strongest, I find myself

all shaky in the knees and confused in the head."

"It's just the nervous shock, sister. You'll be all right by and by. Trouble is like sickness, it takes a while to recuperate from it."

There was a knock at the door and Annie Laurie entered bearing a tray. Behind her was Azalea with another. Tea, toast, little golden omelettes, preserves and other dainties tempting to the appetites of two jaded old ladies appeared on the best dishes and the whitest napery that could be found in the Pace household.

"My, my, what a fuss you make over us," said Aunt Adnah, disapprovingly. "I'm sure the common dishes would have done perfectly well, Ann."

Annie Laurie shook her finger at her aunt.

"Don't you call me Ann," she laughed. "The best dishes are none too good for you two; and anyway, we're celebrating because we're home!"

Aunt Zillah narrowed her eyes in a way she had.

"You're sure you love your home, child, now that there are only us two old souls in it, and that we're so poor and all?"

"Of course I love my home," declared Annie Laurie. "I should say I did! And we're not go-

ing to be poor. I simply won't be poor. And I don't feel poor anyway. It's so meachin to feel poor! Please don't use the word, Aunt. How can you, when we have a fire like this and suppers as good as those on the trays, and when we can ask a friend in whenever we please, and go on lovely vacations? Poor!"

She gave a little shiver of disgust at the word.

"Well, I'm sure you do put heart into one," sighed Aunt Zillah, as if she needed all the good cheer that anybody could spare her. "Sometimes I do think we're falling off in our spirits, Adnah and I."

The girls stood laughing and talking with the aunts a few minutes more, and then ran down to get their own suppers.

"Let's eat it before the living room fire," said Azalea. "We'll put it on the sewing table."

"And we'll have Sam to eat with us. He simply must, that's all, we've so much to tell him," added Annie Laurie.

It was a much easier thing for Azalea to cook the supper than it was for Annie Laurie to persuade Sam to come in and eat with them. But the bright-faced girl, with her good will shining in her face, succeeded in overcoming his

scruples. It was very hard for so social a creature as Sam to keep to himself, holding before himself the hard fact:

"I am the son of a man who is under suspicion. I must not be the friend of honest folk until I am proved of an honest family."

To-night, at any rate, he permitted himself to forget. So, while the rain dashed against the windowpane, the three sat, warm and dry, in the familiar room and ate their supper, while the girls told stories of the curious people they had seen, and of the nice and interesting ones, and of dangers from which they had thrillingly escaped.

In the midst of it there came a knock at the door.

"I'll go," said Annie Laurie, "I'm nearest. Who can it be on such a night?"

She flung wide the door, and then as the other two turned to see who it was, she half closed it again, involuntarily, and stepped back. Something was the matter, Sam perceived as he started to his feet; then he saw Annie Laurie fling open the door again and back away from it.

"Come in," she said in a strange voice.

And a man entered with a curiously swift

movement, almost as if he were hunted. The rain ran from his clothes and his beard; he was covered with red clay, and he seemed to shrink from observation. Yet after a second he took off his hat, and then Sam saw that it was his father. Mr. Disbrow came into the room at last and closed the door behind him.

"Father!" Sam breathed, but Annie Laurie held up her hand and Sam said no more. She seemed for the moment to be carried out of herself, and to cease to be a very young and inexperienced girl, and to take on the grave look of one who was sitting in judgment.

Disbrow's eyes, usually so wavering, fixed themselves on Annie Laurie's. They were quite on a level, these two, as to height, but the man looked broken and beaten; the girl was strong and free and, in her simple way, proud. She stood there waiting, and Disbrow came on toward her.

"I've come to make it up to you, miss," he said with trembling lips. "I've come to give back what I took from you."

Above the crackling of the fire and the beating of the rain on the windows they heard her say:



"Come in," she said in a strange voice.

"I am glad."

The man tore off his dripping coat, and taking a knife from his pocket, began cutting at the lining. He took out package after package of bills and laid them on the table. And still he clipped, and still the money appeared from the wadded lining of the coat. Then he flung the coat on a chair.

"I'll leave it there," he said. "If there is more you can find it." He folded his arms and looked at the girl.

"Well, that's over," he said. "I tried to go on with the plan I'd laid out for myself, but I couldn't sleep for thinking I was a thief. And then a voice came from Heaven and told me so. Don't smile at that, miss—my poor wife heard the voice, and Hannah heard it. I've left them out in the mountains and God only knows what will come to them, for I reckon you'll be wanting to hand me over to the sheriff."

"Oh, Mr. Disbrow," cried Annie Laurie, "you know I'll not do anything of the kind. I couldn't do such a thing to an old neighbor, and to Sam's father at that!"

Disbrow raised one arm in the air.

"I'll make a clean breast of everything now,"

he said in his deep quavering voice. "Sam ain't my boy; nor he ain't my wife's boy. He's taken from the asylum, Sam is. We thought we wasn't going to have a child, and we took him and never told him. Anybody could see he wa'n't our boy, if they'd had sense."

Annie Laurie half turned. There was a consuming pity in her heart, and a great hope that Sam would not disappoint her. And he did not. He took three strides and stood by the man he had all his life called father.

"I reckon we won't go back on the relationship," he said. "If you took me out of an asylum and cared for me when I was little, I don't mean to go back on you just now, sir, when you're—when you're down on your luck."

"He's not down on his luck," said Annie Laurie in her clear tones. "He's a lucky man to have the courage to bring back the thing he took that wasn't his, Sam. Not everyone could have done it. You ought to feel proud of a father who could do that, Sam."

"I am," said Sam. "I'm mighty proud of him."

Their youth, and the generosity of their youth, their desire to do the best they could for each

other's sake, had winged them up to that high place where Mercy sits. Azalea, watching them, thrilled to think they were her friends. They were doing precisely what Ma McBirney would have wished them to do if she had been there to advise them. They were not being just—they were much, much better than just. They were merciful. Annie Laurie went on:

"I don't know how much money there is there, sir," she said, pointing to the pile of bills on the table, "but I am sure there is a good deal and that you have given me back all you took."

"All but two hundred dollars, miss. I gave Sam a hundred, and I used a hundred myself. I'll pay it back some day, if I can."

"What I was going to say was that I want you to count out a thousand dollars of that money for yourself. I'm not going to lend it to you. I don't want you to go on thinking you have a debt like that. I know you've had a hard time, Mr. Disbrow. Father used to speak of it and feel sorry; and I've felt dreadfully sorry for you times and times. Now, you're to take a thousand and just pretend, if you like, that my father willed it to you, and then you're to go

away where you can begin over with a little shop, or farm, and make your way."

Pretend that Simeon Pace had willed it to him—Simeon Pace whom he had hated because Pace was a successful man and he an unsuccessful one! And Pace had felt sorry for him! But if that was the case, why hadn't he helped him? Yet Hector Disbrow knew why—he knew it was because of his lazy ways and his bitter tongue, and for the first time in his life he saw himself as his neighbors had seen him, as a hang-dog man whom it was anything but pleasant to meet. Yes, he had missed the road, someway. He hadn't known how to find the House of Good Will. He had broken his wife's spirit, and had darkened the lives of the two children who lived beneath his roof. He had made a failure of everything—had even sunk to be a thief. And now here was this girl giving him another chance. And Sam was saying that he'd still be his son!

He was cold and hungry, worn with sleeplessness, shaken with the memory of the terrible voice that had cried in the mist, and this unexpected kindness was too much for him. He had not meant to do it—did not know that he ever

could do such a thing—but he burst into the sobs of a broken man, and when Sam had led him to a chair he dropped his head on the table and wept.

They talked together, the four of them, when Mr. Disbrow had grown calmer. Azalea would have left them, but Annie Laurie wanted her to stay. She held her hand and kept her close beside her.

"You understand everything, Azalea," she whispered. "You don't seem surprised at good times or at bad times, dear. You take things as they come. Stay with me, Azalea, I need you very much."

"What will you do, miss?" Disbrow had asked. "Will you let the people know how you got your money back?"

Annie Laurie thought a moment.

"Don't you think they have been suspecting you, Mr. Disbrow?" she asked.

The man nodded miserably.

"There wa'n't a man in town would shake hands with me," he confessed.

"And don't you think," went on the girl, "that they thought it fine of Sam to give up his school

and to come back here and help out the aunts and myself?"

"They must have thought he was trying to give a square deal," said Disbrow.

"Well, then," Annie Laurie went on, holding tight to Azalea's hand to gather courage, "I think I ought to tell them. It will let them know you were honest in your heart after all, and it will make them give Sam credit for what he's done. I'm sure that's the right way, Mr. Disbrow. When I was naughty I used to like to be punished—it made me feel fair and honest again. And you'll feel better if the neighbors know. That will be your punishment. And what's more, it will explain everything. I don't want to have to tell a lie when I say how I got my money back. I never yet told a lie and I don't want to begin now."

The man bowed his head and sat staring into the fire.

"I reckon what you say is right," he admitted.

Azalea had placed a heaping plate of food before him. She made hot coffee and urged him to drink it. And she found a pouch of tobacco and forced that on him. His clothes had dried

before the hearty fire, and when he had lighted his pipe he began to feel master of himself again.

"I think, dad," said Sam, "that the best thing for you to do is to get out of here to-night before you're seen. I've some heavy new boots that you can wear and you can have my raincoat and sou'wester. That's my advice—hit the trail to-night and get so far out of the way that none of your old neighbors will meet you. Settle in some live town over the mountain; put mother in a nice, light, little house—and whatever you do, don't have green shades to the windows—and maybe she'll get well again."

"She's better now," said Mr. Disbrow. "Fifty percent better. But of course she looks with contempt on me. I don't know whether she'll let me go back to her or not, Sam."

"Mother!" cried Sam. "Of course she will! You go back and don't take no for an answer. You-all just hike over the mountain to a new place and get a new start all 'round. And one of the first things is to get Hannah's eyes straightened. She can't enjoy herself the way she is. It just spoils her life."

"Yes, it does, Mr. Disbrow," put in Azalea.

"It makes her so shy that it's terrible for her. Do say you'll have her eyes made right."

Disbrow looked up at Azalea with something almost like a smile. She was bending forward pleading with him, her own odd, intense look on her face. She did indeed seem to have a way of understanding the troubles of people.

"I'll do it, miss," he said, "and I'll tell Hannah you-all told me to."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Mr. Disbrow turned his eyes on Sam and a deep flush spread over his face.

"It's all right for you to say you'll stand by me, son," he said, "but if I go sneakin' off and hidin' away, how am I going to be able to stand by you? What will 'come of you, anyway?"

"Now don't worry about me, sir," Sam said independently; "I'll get on somehow."

"Oh, it's going to be easy for Sam," Annie Laurie broke in enthusiastically. "You see it's this way. Now I have my money I'll be able to pay for all the work he's been doing for me, and he'll keep right on working and saving up his money, and next October he'll go back to the Rutherford Academy. It's not so far away but that he can afford to run down here every week

or two to go over the books, and he'll get some good man in to take his place while he's away. Vacations, he can take charge himself. Oh, we'll get on now, Mr. Disbrow, both Sam and I, and we'll have plenty of schooling too."

Hector Disbrow looked at the tall boy sitting beside him and at the bright-faced girl who had spoken, and started to say something, but thought better of it and put his hand up to his mouth instead.

"Oh, yes," he heard Azalea murmur. "They'll get on now. Things are coming all right for them just as they have for me. There's an end to trouble, isn't there, if you just hang on and wait?"

"Well, there is, miss," agreed Mr. Disbrow. "And now I reckon I better take the advice you all gave me and hike."

"Are you going to walk, sir?" Sam asked.

"No, I've got one of the horses hid back here a ways. I'll slip on him and get up the mountain before daybreak. Your ma and Hannah will be worrying about me, I reckon. Ma's down on me, but that won't keep her from worrying about me, you know."

Sam nodded.

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"They're sleeping in a little tent I rigged up for them—kind of half house, half tent. Durn it, I wish I could buy something to take to 'em. The food supply's getting mighty low."

"Have you saddle bags on your horse, Mr. Disbrow?" Annie Laurie asked.

"I reckon," said Disbrow dryly, ashamed to test her generosity further.

"Then drive up to the storehouse door and we'll be out with a lantern. I've enough food to feed a little army and you-all mustn't go hungry while that's the case."

He avoided her look as he thanked her. Was she going to remember her offer to him of a thousand dollars? She surely was.

"Azalea," she said, "count out the money I promised Mr. Disbrow."

Azalea turned to the table where the fascinating rolls lay. There was indeed, much of it. Most of the bills were of the hundred dollar denomination. None of the children had seen anything like it—it was like looking into Aladdin's cave to stand there beside that old table with rolls of bank notes. Perhaps each one of the young persons wished that it had been in gold instead of paper money, but even as it was

it thrilled them. Azalea's fingers trembled, as slowly and accurately she counted out the ten one hundred-dollar bills and handed them to Annie Laurie, who in turn gave them to Mr. Disbrow. He would have liked, in the shamed soul of him, to make some sort of a joke of it, but he could not and the cheap words he tried to speak died on his lips.

"Thank you—thank you," was all he said.

"It's not because you brought back my money," Annie Laurie added, with something of the stern accent of her Aunt Adnah; "it's because you're an old neighbor, as I said, and because I've known you ever since I was a little girl and I have seen that things were hard for you. Most of all, it's because Sam would like me to do it. That's so, isn't it, Sam; you like me to do it?"

"Oh, Annie Laurie," Sam cried, choking, "I like you to do it."

He lifted the old coat from the chair and helped his father into it, but it was soaking wet and he flung it down again.

"Wait," he said; "I'll be back with the dry things in a minute."

So in the new, dry boots, a reefer, raincoat and

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storm hat—fed, warmed, forgiven, the man who had so failed went out from Annie Laurie's door.

"We'll be waiting at the storehouse for you," she called after him. And half an hour later, with his saddle bags well filled, he was off up the mountain, never to come into their lives again.

"Come back by the fire," pleaded Azalea. "Come, Sam, come back and get warm before you go to bed."

"I don't see how it can be so chilly again after all the lovely days we've had," Annie Laurie remarked. She was deeply moved and glad of the opportunity to talk about something besides the man who had just ridden away from them.

So the three went in and sat before the fire.

"Oh, Sam," said Azalea, "you didn't ask Mr. Disbrow who your father really was."

"I don't suppose he knew," Sam said, "and I'm not sure I want to." He dropped his head in his hands and sat staring at the dying fire.

"Oh, well," Annie Laurie said, "America's for individuals. That's what Mr. Summers says and that's what I think too. And as an individual, Sam, you'll pass muster, eh?"

Sam laughed rather bitterly.

"Oh," he half groaned, "I wish—"

"What?" asked Azalea.

"Oh, I don't know what. I was just thinking what a queer, lonely trio we are—orphans, the three of us."

"Yes," said the girls, "that's so."

They sat for a time in silence, each absorbed in thought. The fire crackled a little now and then, and sank lower and lower. By and by Annie Laurie spoke softly—

"Yes," she said, "we're orphans, but I reckon we'll be taken care of."

"Oh, yes," murmured Azalea's soft voice. "I'm sure of it. Why Ma McBirney—"

"The rest of us have no Ma McBirney," Sam reminded her.

But after all, though they were pensive, they were not unhappy. The feeling that they were close and trusted friends comforted them. High adventure seemed to be before them. The fortune, so curiously lost and so strangely regained lay there on the table by them. Sam and Azalea wondered that Annie Laurie did not count it to find out how much it was, but she seemed oddly indifferent to that fact. Only

after a time she arose, brushed the bills into her apron and stood for a moment smiling.

"Sam," she said shyly, "creep up to the attic, softly, so as not to disturb the aunts, and bring me down dad's old tin arm!"

"Oh!" cried Sam, horrified.

"Please," begged the girl.

So Sam brought it and the three laid the rolls of bills neatly within it.

"It will comfort father," said Annie Laurie quaintly, "but to-morrow I'm going to put it in the bank."

CHAPTER XVII

AZALEA'S PARTY

Baby Jonathan had just been stung by one of Pa McBirney's bees.

"I don't like the way he kisseth," he screamed, standing beside the clump of golden glow. "I don't like it a bit."

"I should think not, indeed, mamma's own honey-bird," soothed Mrs. Barbara, dashing for him and gathering him into her arms. "He thought you were a flower, son-son, and just lighted on you."

"He kisseth too hard," sobbed Jonathan, plunging his golden head into the hollow of his mother's arm. "I don't want to play with him any more, ever."

"What a shame that he should be stung at his first party," said his mother indignantly, as she carried him to the seat at the McBirney outlook where she had been sitting with young Richard Heller, Sam Disbrow's friend—the one who had spoken the cruel-kind words of truth to him

which had sent him away from the Rutherford Academy without so much as putting his name on the register. They had been talking about Sam now, and when Mrs. Summers had plastered clay over the wounded cheek of her son, and had soothed him with many kisses, they resumed their conversation.

"It's going to come all right with him next term," Dick said to Mrs. Summers. "All the fellows in the country who know him at all realize what a brick he's been, staying right here and looking his trouble in the face and helping the Paces out the way he did. Why, some of the men wanted him to change his name when it turned out that Disbrow was such a thief, but he wouldn't do it. He said he'd promised his dad—he will call him that—to stick to him, and that it wouldn't be keeping his word to take another name. He said Disbrow was as good a name as any if he *made* it good. So he'll be given a hearty reception when he comes back to Rutherford. I've frozen onto the room next to mine there at the Ballenger dormitories and I'm going to get the prefect to put him in there. The fellows shall see that he and I are friends, anyway. I don't know as that counts for such a

tremendous lot, but I'll let it stand for all it will."

"Bless you," said Mrs. Summers, turning her bright smile on the lad. "I can't tell you what it means to me that my Sam is going to be happy. As you know, he's been living with us the past few months, and never, never did I see a boy who tried harder to do what was right. But, dear me, that isn't all. I've known good folk who almost wore me out. But Sam is charming. Now that he's happy once more he's the very life of the place, and that's saying a good deal of a house where my husband lives. Besides, Jonathan rather keeps things going. Altogether, I suppose we're the noisest and the happiest lot in Lee."

"I dare say you are," smiled the youth admiringly. "I know Sam's a wonder at keeping things humming. He's been like that from the time he was a little boy, and I never could make out how such a live one could belong to a sour, down-in-the-mouth family like the Disbrows. It was quite a relief to me when I found he wasn't really related to them after all, but had just been dropped in the nest, so to speak."

"It was a relief to everyone who cared for

him, I imagine," Mrs. Summers said. "But am I not keeping you here, Dick, away from the young people?"

"I wouldn't stay here if I didn't want to, Mrs. Summers," Dick replied gallantly. "You see I don't know these girls very well, but Sam wanted me to come up with him, and Azalea was good enough to say she'd love to have me, so of course I came. I've often ridden by the McBirneys and thought what a delightful little place it was, but I didn't suppose I'd ever be coming to a birthday party here."

"Well, naturally you wouldn't have supposed it. There are you in your fine, handsome home, the banker's son, all of your paths running in a different direction from those of the McBirneys, yet I doubt if ever in your life you visited a house where there was more real courtesy and hospitality than there is here."

"Oh, I'm sure of that, Mrs. Summers. And then Azalea—isn't she a wonder? She fascinates everybody. As my mother was saying this morning, if ever there was a girl who would make you forget all about social distinction and just join in on a happy human basis to have a good time—all hands 'round—that person is

Azalea. Of course, as mother reminded me, Azalea came from as cultivated a family as ever lived in this district, although she is now to all intents the daughter of these mountain people."

"It's a privilege," said Barbara Summers, "to live with Mrs. McBirney, and anyone who has the sense to get the most out of it will grow up to be good and patient and wise."

Perhaps these virtues were not the ones which most appealed to Dick Heller at that period of his life, but however that may be, he could not keep his eyes off the mountain girl. He could see her in her white, hand-wrought frock, her hair blown about her dark face, flashing here and there with her friends. He saw her run to serve some one who was merely driving along the road—for the road over Tennyson Mountain to Lee ran quite through the McBirney yard, as has been said before. It was evident that the McBirney's were asking everyone who passed to congratulate them on their adopted daughter's fifteenth birthday, and in return they were served with the drink of sweetened limes and the honey cake which Ma McBirney had prepared for the occasion.

And there was Pa McBirney in his white

linen clothes—they had been his father's—talking with Mr. Carson, in his smart white flannels; and Miss Adnah and Miss Zillah in new figured lawns, carrying their old fringed parasols bought years before on a great occasion at Charleston; and near them was Mrs. Kitchell with the younger children, brown and strong, and quite in the spirit of the occasion; and Hi and Jim were putting boards on saw horses, ready for the feast; and Carin and Annie Laurie were running down the road to welcome some freshly arrived guests.

"I say," boomed the great voice of the Reverend Absalom Summers, "there never was another spot like this one! Now, was there ever, anywhere? When I get up here I feel just like a boy, I'm so happy—why, I'm just silly with happiness. I like the way the grass smells, and the road winds, and the spring gushes, and the flowers blossom, and the clouds sail, and the valley lies, and Mrs. McBirney cooks, and Mr. McBirney tells stories, and Jim whistles, and I'll be plagued if I don't like everything about it."

"Well, be calm, Absalom dear," smiled his

wife. "You don't have to hoot like an owl because you're happy."

"You know how to stop the hooting of an owl?" demanded the irrepressible man of the company in general. "You just stand it as long as you can without swearing and then you take off your right slipper and put it on your left foot and the owl will stop. I've tried it dozens of times—and the owl always stopped."

"Git along!" called a voice from somewhere up among the trees. "That way don't compare with my way."

"Who is that challenging me?" roared Mr. Summers. But he had no need to ask. It was Haystack Thompson who was dropping down on them from somewhere up in the mountain, and who of course had his fiddle under his arm. For to go to a party without a fiddle was something of which Mr. Thompson never yet had been guilty.

"What's your receipt for stopping a hootin' owl, Mr. Bones?" demanded Mr. Summers.

"Why," answered Haystack seriously, "you jest heat a poker white hot and wave it in the air three times and they'll stop clean off."

Absalom Summers shook his great fist under

Haystack's nose—"What's the use in trying to force a fool superstition like that down our throats, Thompson?" he roared. "Changing slippers is the only up-to-date, scientific way and Heller here, who's been to school, can tell you so."

But Haystack refused to yield an inch. A heated poker was the thing for him, he said.

"A fiddle's the thing for you, Mr. Thompson," cried Mrs. Carson. "I don't believe you know how to handle anything else—not even a porridge spoon."

Indeed, unconsciously, the old man had been taking the covering from the instrument.

"That's right, that's right," Thomas McBirney said. "Tune up, old friend. Then we'll know that it's a party for sure."

And tune up he did. At first it seemed only to be tuning, and they couldn't tell where he left off getting ready and when he began to play. But by and by there were odd little sounds that might have been squirrels chattering, or birds stirring in their nests. Then they grew sweeter and more liquid and seemed like water running over stones and wind singing in the trees. And by and by the whistle of a robin

broke in and then a thrush sang his soul out at the gates of Heaven; then the night seemed to be falling, kindly, as if it would give rest to all the weary. After that it was black for a moment or two, as if a storm was gathering. There seemed to be distant sounds of thunder. But it passed quickly as some nights do, if one is, for example, fifteen, and then the dawn came over the hills, dancing. There must have been blithe maidens ushering it in—for who else would have had such light and lilting feet? Yes, they were dancing down over the hills, scattering flowers, and the birds were perched upon their shoulders and rosy clouds were wreathing them.

At least that was the lovely picture that Haystack Thompson's music brought to Barbara Summers as she sat holding her little son, and then the next thing she knew all of her friends really were dancing. Ma McBirney was dancing with Mr. Carson, and Pa McBirney had Annie Laurie for a partner, and Sam had Azalea, and Carin was with Dick Heller, and Jim was footing it with Hi's little sister, and Hi and his mother were making a show of hopping around.

Only Absalom Summers wasn't dancing, be-

cause he was the Methodist minister and didn't believe in it—at least he said he didn't. He sat beating juba with his great hands, making a terrific rhythmical accompaniment and crying:

"That's it—keep it up—go right along on the road to destruction—keep it up there, McBirney—I'm here to see you through." He threw back his head with its tossed straight hair and gave vent to a roar of laughter.

"You're a comfortable preacher to have around," declared Mr. Carson, stopping to catch his breath.

"Comfortable!" roared Mr. Summers, giving a twist to Mr. Carson's meaning. "I never was so comfortable in my life."

Miss Adnah and Miss Zillah were helping Ma McBirney to set the table now, and the young people were dashing about on errands, and more friends were coming, some from over the mountains and some up from town, and by and by they all sat down to the table and ate together. There was fried chicken, and rice cooked with cheese, and beaten biscuit, and golden butter in little pats, and cooling drinks of lime and orange and mint, and cakes—three kinds—and ice cream which the Carson's had

brought up in great freezers. It is necessary to tell what there was to eat, because eating is a very important part of a party.

And then there were the gifts to see. Almost everyone had brought a gift. Even some of the people who were passing and who had not known there was to be a party at all, and who perhaps did not know the McBirneys very well, had fished out something from their wagons for the orphan girl who had made so many people love her.

So there was the little gold watch from Mrs. Carson, and the ivory toilet set from Carin, a set of Tennyson from Mr. Carson, and a hand-made petticoat from Annie Laurie, and some old eardrops of pink coral made into a brooch by Miss Adnah, and a knitted shoulder shawl from Miss Zillah, and a kind of zither thing that Sam had made himself, and a box of sweets from Dick Heller, and—are you out of breath? Because there are ever so many more things. There was a rag rug, beautifully woven, from Mrs. Kitchell, and a whisk broom holder from Hi, and a wonderful melon-shaped basket, fine and delicate, from Haystack Thompson, who knew more than most about weaving baskets, and

there was a white parasol from Ma McBirney—who never could afford a parasol for herself—and a new riding whip from Pa McBirney, and from Jim a new curry comb which he said he would use when he curried Paprika, the pony. And then other people, about whom you know nothing, brought their contributions. Everything was laid out in that pleasant, open chamber, which it will be remembered divided the McBirney house in two.

The people who came to this party weren't the sort whose singing is ruined by something good to eat. After the dishes had been cleared away they sat where they could look off at the valley as the shadows began to stretch long and purple down from the ridges.

And then everyone regretfully realized that it was time to go home. So there was a great mounting of horses and piling into wagons, and Jim and Hi held stirrups and helped ladies into the high mountain wagons—the sort you can turn the wheel under if you have to make a short curve—and presently they were all off and away.

Azalea, all in her pretty white, slipped on Paprika's back and rode for a way with her guests. But at the first turn she shouted her

good-byes to them and turned back up the mountain. It was getting to be dusky now even along her high path, and the coolness of the evening was settling about her. It was a fragrant dusk, for the summer was at its height and sent out a thousand pleasant perfumes. She brought her pony to a halt as she reached the top of the ridge, and waited for a moment to let herself sink fairly into the place and the hour. The trees, whispering in her ear, seemed her close friends; the night was like a protectress; the little sleeping creatures in the trees and the holes of the ground seemed close and kind.

For once that eager nature of hers, which asked for so full a measure of joy and delight, was satisfied. She spoke a word to her little mare, which began picking out the road again with her sure feet. As Paprika drew near the house she whinnied, and Azalea laughingly imitated her.

"Send her along, sis," shouted Jim from somewhere in the gloom. "I'll put her up."

"Thanks," called back Azalea. She slipped from her saddle and ran into the lighted room. Pa McBirney was smoking, Ma McBirney was still busy putting thing to rights. Azalea gave

her a gentle push which sent her into her own deep-armed rocker.

"Daughter will do the rest," she said.

"Oh, my dear," protested Mary McBirney, "aren't you tired? You've been going like a streak all day."

"Yes, but I didn't begin before sunup the way you did, mother. My, my, what a happy day it's been! What a happy day! And a little more than a year ago—" she could not go on.

All three were silent, thinking of the changes a year had brought. Azalea had remembered that morning to trim with flowers the graves beneath the Pride of India tree, so that they would, in their way, be included in the festival. For Ma McBirney had taught her how love can live on though death comes between, and how sorrow can be turned into sweetness.

That seemed to be the secret of the whole thing anyway—turning sorrow into sweetness.

Finally Azalea spoke again. She had just set the best dishes in their place and folded up the table cover.

"And the girls," she said musingly, "they've come to me too, this year—Carin and Annie Laurie. Dear me, but we do have fun!"

"Yes," responded Ma McBirney sympathetically, "I never did see three girls have a better understanding of each other, or ones who enjoyed each other's society more. What is it Mrs. Carson calls it?"

"The Triple Alliance," smiled Azalea. "And now, since it's all right about Annie Laurie's money, I really and truly do think we're the happiest girls in the world."

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